A Competency Development Framework for a Continuously Learning Sales Unit

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This thesis is a research-based development work done in cooperation with a global organization in environmental technology field with a complex partner ecosystem

The purpose of this research is to gain in-depth understanding of the strategically important sales competencies, learning and development of these competencies, and development opportunities of these competencies in the target company. This contemporary and contextual understanding is then used as a bases of a development proposal that aims at improving the learning and development of competencies in organizational, unit and individual levels.

The research scope is limited to researching behavioral sales competencies only in the context of the target organization's sales unit during the time and resources of this research. The project took place in between February and November in 2020. The research is case study research that focuses on a single case through qualitative and quantitative research methods. The data collection methods include the analysis of documents, theme-based interviews in focus groups and in 1-to-1 settings, observations, and a closed-option survey. The analysis of data is done through content analysis method. The validity and reliability of research results are confirmed through triangulation of different data sources, saturation of interview data, peer- reviewing and careful documentation of the project proceedings.

The research results cover eleven identifiable sales competencies that drive sales performance and that these competencies are learned mainly through informal individual learning opportunities. The research results present plenty of organization, unit, and individual level development opportunities. All and all, the research results offer in-depth understanding of the researched topics in their context.

The research did not offer any new information to the wider research community. They enforced the results of prior research. The research results give an in-depth, contemporary and context sensitive understanding of the researched phenomenon in the target organization and offer a case of adaptation of the related theories in practice. They cannot be adopted to other use cases as such.

A development proposal is a competency development framework including a process supported by sales role specific tools like a sales competency profile, competency gap analysis instrument and a compilation of unit and individual level learning and development opportunities supported by the target organization. The efficacy of the proposal is not examined in this work, and it may be affected by macro-economic changes caused by the Covid-19, which effects were not considered in this project.

Asiasanat
Resource-based view of strategy, competency-based learning and development in organizations, learning organizations, competency development framework, sales competencies

Content

1 Introduction

Nurturing an organisation's competitiveness is one of the C-level decision makers' core concerns in any organisation. Competitiveness is perceived differently at different intervals, but in 2020, the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy is one of the most used strategic approaches. This thesis follows the principals of the RBV of strategy in researching an organisation's sales competencies in a complex business environment with an intention to develop an organisation's internal configuration of strategic resources.

This thesis is based on a development project that was done in cooperation with a medium-sized Finnish high technology company that specialise in environmental technology solutions and services in a global scale. Despite the complex business environment, the target organisation has been the market leader in its business line of oil spill response equipment for ages. But as the business environment changes with the times, this product intensive approach does not offer substantial growth opportunities anymore. On the contrary, the business growth has been forecasted to slow down remarkably during the upcoming years.

Although the renewal needs concern the whole target organisation, the sales is chosen as the target unit for this development project as it is perceived to have the most profound impact to reaching new business goals. In the beginning of this thesis process, the management of the target organisation resolved that to grow, or even to maintain their status quo, the company needs to focus more on selling continuous service agreements instead of selling concrete products. This change indicated that the organisation's sales resources needed to be realigned to support the new business goals. The management faced the question of how to evaluate and develop the organisation's sales capabilities to support the chosen strategic direction and thus seize new growth opportunities.

This thesis can be classified as a development work that is based on a case study -research results. The objective of this research is to gain in-depth understanding of the target organisation's sales competencies, the learning and development of these competencies, and how to develop these competencies on organisational, unit and individual levels in order to assemble a development proposal to support the organisation's RBV of strategy. This sort of development proposal offers customised, scalable, enduring, and agile avenues for development of strategic resources of the target organisation in the context of sales. Continuous development and learning are here perceived as factors for maintaining competitiveness according to the RBV of strategy that is also the chosen strategy approach of the target organisation.

This research is valuable to any sales expert organisations that work in complex environments and is developing their competitiveness through the principals and tools of RBV of strategy. The research of evolving sales competencies and competency development to support competitiveness in global VUCA -environment is widely considered important as the changes in environment have profound impacts on businesses and should be researched from multiple point of views. Based on RBV of strategy, sales competencies can be considered essential for the success of business, and it is worthwhile to research and compare how context driven or changing these competencies are based on different case examples, which accumulates more research results and use cases.

This thesis also increases the number of researched cases of sales capabilities from environmental technology and services sector. In this sector, part of the business occurs through crises, catastrophes, and conflicts while customers vary from governments to private companies and NGO's increasing the complexity of sales environment. Finally, even though the RBV of strategy is the prevailing approach of many organisations, its methods are considered fewer and vaguer in comparison to the tools related to e.g., industrial organisation- approach. This disparity indicates that there is still room for new research cases and accumulated knowledge related to the applications of the tools of RBV of strategy.

The red thread in this thesis is the RBV of strategy, which places the focus on continuously developing an organisation's internal resources to gain organisational capabilities that influence competitiveness. This approach is widely considered to have been formulated in the 1990's, but there were a few even earlier similarly oriented writings that were considered to differ from the previously prevailing industrial organisation -strategy approach that is a positioning-based view to strategy. A professor and consultant Jay B. Barney is considered as one of the main developers of the RBV of strategy. Other significant names in terms of theory are, for example, Gary Hamel and C.K. Prahalad and their ground-breaking works on competence development. The RBV of strategy is nowadays closely linked with the theory of learning organisations, principles of competence management and learning and development, which are all aspects that can be represented by competency development frameworks.

In this study, the recognised area for development covers the salespeople's competencies related with excellent sales performance in changing business environments and how those competencies can be developed into organisational capabilities through a framework. The problem is perceived through the RBV of strategy making this research a study concerning the development of individual, unit level and organisational competencies and their impact on the competitiveness. This research is also linked to leading sales and development of sales resources.

1.1 Background Information

This development project is conducted in co-operation with a family-owned, medium-sized, and globally active environmental technology and services company in Finland. The target company has altogether ca. 350 employees and activities in 104 countries. The company's strategically important units are sales, research & development, and production. In addition, the company has back-office employees to take care of the support tasks of different projects. The company operates through strategically situated international hubs and partner networks forming a business ecosystem that enables them to operate agilely globally. The structure of the company as well as the business environment consisting of various levels of partnerships is complex and under constant development.

In this project, both the management and the in-house sales resources were invited to actively participate in this research. At the time of this project work, the centralised top management of the company consists of CEO(/CFO), CIO and COO, who are all located in Finland. In addition, there are 11 internationally located salespeople, whose core responsibility is to sell environmental solutions and services both directly and indirectly to clients. All these salespeople report to the COO. Most of the salespeople are responsible of their own regions' sales, for example, of sales taking place in Africa, Middle East, China, US, or Finland. Some of the sales people also operate globally beyond and over any geographical boundaries.

The salespeople's performance targets and compensation models vary based on their regions of responsibility, but all of them are assessed and monitored through similar metrics making it possible to recognize already the best performers based on the existing sales performance criteria that favours the sales of service agreements.

The deal sizes differ from hundreds to millions of dollars depending on the case. The targeted salespeople are considered industry experts and consultants, who often get their quotas through direct or indirect sales of products, or solution packages to new or existing customer organizations. Or they sell one-time solution packages to cleaning, risk management or prevention projects that are often done in close collaboration and through partnerships with other related organizations in the field. The role of the target company in these projects is negotiated by the salespeople as part of the sales contracts. Usually, the case is that the bigger the company's role in a project, the bigger the amount of revenue. Also, a bigger role or gaining the highest possible status of the project leader in projects brings more visibility and fame in the field of business. This brings in more opportunities for new projects. On the other hand, it is vital that the salespeople do not promise presence in projects that may take longer than estimated or turn out to exceed the target company's internal and extended resources. Especially the service contracts are years- or decade long complex agreements that tend to involve an ecosystem of other companies. This complexity in deals makes the profit calculation increasingly difficult.

Another part of the sales comes from selling products and services during the times of environmental crisis or catastrophes. During these times, the salespeople need to be in a right place at the right time and provide continuous availability for the client needs. They need to manage the organization's internal and extended resources to gather products and services outside the target organization's regular and forecasted stock.

In the Fall 2019, the top management of the target company had in their strategy creation process determined a new strategic company-wide direction that steered the actions of all the strategic units including, and especially, sales. This makes the timing especially good for researching future-oriented and desirable sales competencies.

This development project can be considered as an independent entity, but it is also in line with other simultaneous RBV of strategy driven internal development projects aimed at transforming the company into an agile service provider with the core value of organisational learning.

1.2 Key Concepts

This subchapter presents the key concepts used in this research in an alphabetical order. They comprise terms inherent to RBV of strategy, learning organisations, learning and development, human resources capital (HRC), competency frameworks and sales competencies. These concepts are here presented in alphabetical order and will be further presented in the literature review in the chapter 2 and its subchapters.

Adult learning principles or andragogy refers to the concept of how adults learn and how adult learning differs from learning as a child (Knowles, Holton & Swanson 2015, 155).

Competences are abilities that are transferred to practice and performed well against a set standard (Sanghi 2016, 10-11; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36). They can be perceived in practice as a manifestation of a person's know-how (Bach & Sulikova 2019, 290).

Competencies are knowledge, skills, attitudes, experiences and even contacts that a person needs to succeed in their role effectively. High levels of role-specific competencies are referred to as professional expertise, which is expressed through behaviours that can be learned and developed. (Mulder 2017, 96; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36).

The difference between **competence** and **competency** can be encapsulated by stating that the term **competence** refers to actual performance and **competency** to the behavioural abilities required to perform the work effectively. The use of these definitions often overlaps in literature. (Sengupta, Venkatesh & Sinha 2013, 506).

Competency identification or mapping is the process of finding and recognizing those competencies that are necessary for successful performance in an organisation (Sanghi 2016, 24).

Competency (success) profile is a documented set of competencies that describe competencies that can be seen to cause success in a particular position or unit (Sanghi 2016, 24).

Competency framework or model is a description of generic, individual or role specific competencies needed by the employees of certain job domains within an organisation (Sanghi 2016, 24-26).

Competency-Based Learning is one of the applications of competency-frameworks and aims at enhancing important competencies and addressing competency gaps through various learning and development opportunities in an organisation (Sanghi 2016, 24).

Core competences are those capabilities that are critical for the success of organisation's vision, mission and strategy and are recognized as competitive advantages according to RBV (Sanghi 2016, 24; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 55).

Development in this context refers to realisation and/or growth of an individual's ability and potential through learning and educational experiences (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 379).

Education refers to the development of the knowledge, values and understanding necessary in all aspects of life in general (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 379).

Human resources capital (HRC) or human capital stems from individual-level characteristics including knowledge, skills, training, education, state of health etc. Micro-level human capital consists of competencies of an individual and macro-level human capital is the is the sum of competencies of all those individuals involved in an organisation, unit, or team. (Haq 2017, 262, 266.)

Learning is a learner's internal process of acquiring and internalizing new knowledge, skills, attitudes, experiences, and contacts that lead to change in behaviour in an individual (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 37).

Learning organisations are organisations that aim at achieving competitive advantage through developing the ability of continuous learning and renewal. They can be referred to as organisations that have an enduring ability to acquire and take advantage of new competencies. (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 37.)

Resource-Based-View (RBV) of Strategy or Resource-Based Theory (RBT) is a strategy approach that presents that the success and competitive advantage of an organisation are dependent on what resources an organisation has and how efficiently they are used. The resources can be financial, physical, technological, or immaterial like reputation, internal structures, company culture and human resources. (Viitala 2021, Chapter 1.3.)

Training is a systematic application of formal processes to help people to acquire knowledge and skills, which enable them to better perform their jobs (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 379).

Sales performance refers to the effectiveness of individual salespeople and /or sales unit in selling activities. It is an ability to achieve sales goals (Viitala & Jylhä 2019, Chapter 3).

Sales competencies are knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences that drive sales performance of individuals and sales unit (Terho, Eggert, Haas & Ulaga 2015, 14; Verbeke, Dietz & Verwaal 2011, 408).

2 Literature Review

In this literature review, I present the topical theoretical framework of this research. I present the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy, also called the resource-based theory (RBT), that is the principal philosophy guiding this research. In this chapter, I review the notion of learning organisations that is one of the principal tools of the RBV of strategy and closely linked with developing human resources capital (HRC) in organisations, in units, and in individual level. I review theories and research of organisational learning and development and competency frameworks that can be found from the very centre of any competency-based business development solution or application. Finally, I will present theories and research concerning sales competencies that are considered to have importance in driving sales performance.

In this review of related theory, I refer to a vast number of international, peer-reviewed academical materials including articles, research and books that dig deep into different aspects of the presented theories. I find inspiration from different studies from varies industries, organisations, and research reviews. All and all, I aim at drawing a multifaceted, critically reviewed, and applicable theoretical framework for my own research project.

In addition to the fresh and recent literature, I use some older reference materials that have been most often referred to and recognised as the original sources of certain ideas and approaches that keep repeating themselves in the literature and that are also referred to in the recent studies from the field.

2.1 Resource-Based View of Strategy

In this chapter, I introduce the concept of RBV of strategy, which refers to a management's approach to strategy and strategic development of organisations. It is necessary to introduce the principles of RBV of strategy and some related key terms and assumptions to understand the fundamental beliefs and the whole reasoning behind this development work. Engagement with the RBV of strategy is already a very profound strategic decision from the target organisation.

In literature, it is often pointed out that RBV of strategy was founded on the ideas of Edith Penrose. Her book "T*he Theory of the Growth of the Firm"* dates to 1959. Her study links strategic management and organizational economics together. The modern concept of RBV of strategy dates back to the 1990's and owns a lot to the works of Robert M. Grant and Jay B. Barney. They formulated the core principle of RBV of strategy that states that an organisation has a competitive advantage over the others, if its strategy is based on resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. This belief has stayed in the heart of RBV of strategy to this day. Nowadays RBV of strategy is considered mainstream approach to strategic management and is a natural decision for any organisation to commit to. (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020, 31; Viitala 2021, Chapter 1.3; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)

Based on the RBV of strategy, an organisation's unique capability to use internal configuration of resources is a source of sustainable competitive advantage. These resources are divided into three clusters (see picture 1.) that are: **1.)** Tangible resources like financial and physical resources. **2.)** Intangible resources like technology, reputation, and culture. **3.)** Human capital resources (HRC) like skills/know-how, communicative and collaborative abilities, and motivation of employees. In other words, the third category covers the competencies of the human resources of an organisation. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 31; Grant 2013; Nyberg, Moliterno, Hale & Lepak 2014, 317-318; Vuorinen 2013, 1.)

Picture 1. The resource-based view (RBV) of strategy according to Grant (2013).

In this development work, the focus is placed on the development of HRC of the target company. The tangible and intangible resources in the internal configuration are not in the centre of this research as the purpose is to gain in-depth understanding of how to improve HRC and thus influence the competitiveness of the target organisation in the context of sales. The tangible and intangible resources existing at the time of this research are available resources that can be used by the salespeople.

Before 1980's, the employees were mostly perceived trough their initial match with the work requirements, which is strongly related to the Taylorian approach or the scientific management approach. Richard Boyatzis's (1982) research "*The Competent Manager* "is considered the catalyst that triggered the popularity of competency development practices in business for good. The trend was enforced by competency measurement methodologies created especially in relation to recruitment and professional development, which became popular topics for consultants in the late 1980's. The very first version of a job competency survey was created in 1986 and was used for mapping managerial competencies in huge international companies like Shell International and Barclays. The perception of employees based on their professional potentiality is an integrate part of the RBV of strategy. (Sanghi 2016, 1-5; Woodruffe 1993, 29.)

The third cluster of resources or, namely, professional competencies consist of individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and even contacts, which result in effective or even superior performance (Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36). In the context of this research, the focus is on those competencies that drive sales performance in the target company and those are referred to as sales competencies. In literature, competencies are often divided into behavioural, technical, and qualified competency categories depicted in the picture 2. below (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 164-165).

Behavioural competencies	Technical competencies	NQV/SNQV competencies
• Types of behaviours required to deliver results • For all, but best suited for expert or management level • Aims at continuing learning and development indifferent levels of mastery • Can be set out to competency frameworks	• Knowledge and skills needed to meet performance expectations • For all role levels • Aims often at reaching minimum or accepted levels of competences	• Observed and and assessed achievements against a certain standard • Aims at certifying if an individual is competent or not against a certain standard

Picture 2. Three types of competencies according to Armstrong & Taylor (2020, 164-165).

The category of behavioural competencies are behavioural repertoires required to deliver results under such titles like teamworking, communication, leadership and so on. Some carry out these repertoires better than others and are considered to possess high levels of professional expertise. This competency category is especially interesting as it describes very expert and management level competencies. The technical competencies refer to need of competencies to meet the minimum performance levels and the qualified competencies are often certified, special skills that are tested through standardised exams. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 164-165; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36.)

Based on this categorization of competencies, the description of behavioural competencies matches the best the targeted sales competencies of this project work. The salespeople of the target company are described as independent experts and managers with high levels of decision-making power. They are required to have expert levels of industry and technology related knowledge, management skills and ability to solve problems. As an assumption, it could be said that based on the demands of the sales role description, an individual possessing only technical competencies and qualified levels of competencies cannot yet be considered a competent salesperson in the target company. For the purposes, of this development project, I take the position that competencies that drive sales performance can be categorised as contextual behavioural and technical competencies. In this specific research project, the qualified competencies do not carry importance.

A review of RBV of strategy literature, also reveals a very current trend of focusing on researching different perspectives related to the development of unit-level HRC. This approach considers, how a unit is creating valuable HRC, and how these resources are related to a unit's performance. In theory, unit-level HRC are considered as parts of "micro foundations" of organisations. The term refers to individual-level constructs, and organizational processes that are all elements of HRC. Thus unit-level HRC consist of individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics, namely competencies, belonging to a same unit within an organisation. (Haq 2017, 266, 269; Nyberg et al. 2014, 317-318.)

This is a very relevant additional point of view to this development project as the targeted part of the organisation is also a unit, where sales projects can be managed as a unit. As an assumption, the results of this research will reflect individual and sales unit level HRC of the targeted company.

The RBV of strategy leans on the notion that investments in different resource clusters like HRC increases its value to the organisation, which is also the hypothesis of this study. This assumption relies on the idea that investments in developing higher levels of individual competencies will increase competitive advantage that differentiates an organisation from other similar organisations. This assumption is often realised in practice through organisations' efforts in continuously planning and facilitating possibilities for the learning and development of individuals' expertise. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 31; Mulder 2017, 96; Singh, Manrai & Manrai 2015, 54; Viitala 2021, Chapter 1.3.)

Researchers have identified that the need for high levels of individual expertise in modern organisations is strongly influenced by the rise of the information society, the internationalisation of economy, the fast speed of scientific and technological progress. These aspects are researched to have a profound impact on the requirements of work performance. This focus on individuals' professional competencies and expertise levels is also an excellent reflection of the prevailing notion that the enhancement of human capital is the most constant source of competitive advantage in changing business environments in comparison to the development of other resource categories in the RBV on strategy. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 31; Mulder 2017, 96; Singh et al. 2015, 54; Viitala 2021, Chapter 1.3.)

The RBV of strategy as a strategic management approach is linked with a certain set of strategic tools. These tools are meant for analysing the organisations and for implementing plans for reaching development goals. These strategy tools include the VRIO-model analysis, benchmarking -method, Kraljic -matrix for procurement and the notions of employer branding and learning organisations for the point of view of HRC. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32; Haq 2017, 269; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)

The concept of learning organisations is a strategic tool of RBV of strategy that is specifically aimed at developing human competencies to gain competitive advantage as an organisation (Vuorinen 2013, 177). As all the other tools do not match the purpose of this development project, I choose the learning organisation -concept for this study and investigate it in more detail in the chapter 2.2.

The RBV of strategy has also its limitations. For example, it can be difficult to find resources that can even be considered simultaneously valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. To move forward, the organisations tend to place more weight on only certain aspects of the model instead of all four of them. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32.)

Another shortcoming of the theory is that it tends to offer only generalised guidelines for the identification of these strategic resources instead of a standardized method description. It has also been shown in prior research that different resource configurations may provide same value for different organisation. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32.)

In this research, it is acknowledged that although the targeted sales capital resources can be considered valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable to some degree, and due to the lack of comparison points from the same sector, this assessment was only based on the top management own perception and can be later be proven mislead

It has also been pointed out that valuable resources and competitive advantage are often defined with the same terms, which may just be a mistaken assumption in some cases and the value of the resource is not validated e.g., in comparison to competition. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32.)

This is also a very valid critique to consider in this research as the research results cannot be compared with any competitor organisations' capabilities as such research is not available at the time of this study.

The most obvious critique toward the RBV of strategy in literature is the fact that it is blatantly ignoring the effect of any external factors. It can be said that special circumstances, like global pandemics, have an undeniable effect on the competitiveness of organisations despite its excellent organisational capabilities made from configuration of its internal resources. It is thus essential to combine RBV of strategy with other strategic management approaches to have a more rounded approach to strategy. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32.)

In this development project, I acknowledge that the results do not even aim at offering a holistic perception on development needs and are not meant to be used as standalone tools in the strategic development of the target organisation. The effect of external factors can still be seen in this development work as the targeted salespeople are researched in their complex business environments and contexts that are sensitive to external influences.

This development work is strongly based on the beliefs of relevant RBV of strategy literature, which argues that developing microlevels of competencies like individual and unit level competencies in e.g., sales unit will result in higher value HRC, which optimizes the internal configuration of strategic resources affecting organisational capabilities that bring competitive advantage to the organisation. This baseline reasons the whole existence of this research.

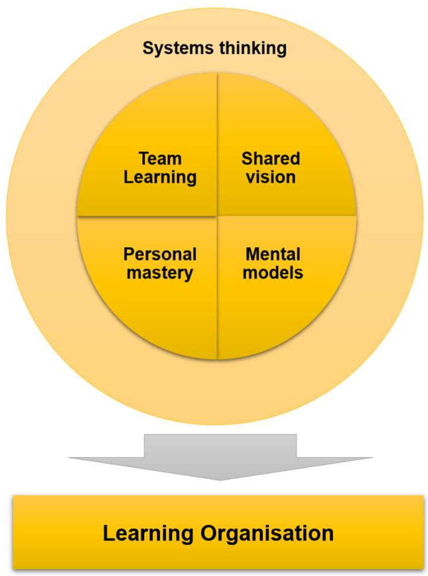
2.2 Learning Organisations

This chapter digs deeper into the literature on learning organisations, which is the main tool linked with competency development based on the RBV of strategy. The notion of learning organisations incorporates practices of analysing and implementing plans for building more intelligent and flexible organisations through recruitment of more competent employees and by extending the skill bases and levels of expertise of the existing employees. In the context of learning organisations, those HRC that influence the achievement of strategic goals, are referred to as strategic HRC and are the core of competitive advantage of an organisation. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 32; Haq 2017, 269; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)

The concept of learning organisations highlights characteristics of strategic learning and development that takes place in three different levels: 1. Individual level. 2. unit level. 3. organisation level. A learning organisation aims at analysing and developing an organisation's HRC. In the recent RBV of strategy literature the concept of learning organisations is seen as the main approach for the development of any unit-level competencies. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 379-380; Nyberg et al. 2014, 317-318; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)

Out of all the other RBV to strategy tools, learning organisations is the best match with the objectives of this research, when the focus is on the HRC development in all the above mentioned three levels of learning and development.

The definition of a learning organisation is "*an organization made up of employees skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge"*. In the context of learning organisations, the term organisation can refer to an entire organisation or a single unit. In this development project, it usually refers to the sales unit of the targeted organisation. A learning organisation is often described through five dimensions or disciplines defined by Peter Senge in 1995 **1.)** Personal mastery**,** which requires individuals to continuously learn and develop. **2.)** Mental models, which involve recognizing, scrutinizing, and developing individuals' generalisations, assumptions, and images about the world. **3.)** Shared vision, which requires individuals to continuously build and co-create overall "goals, values and missions" to create strong commitment and sense of involvement for all. **4.)** Team learning**,** meaning that all team members continue to progress together, and that amazing teams are not born, but grown in unison. **5.)** Systems thinking, which means understanding that businesses like individual lives are systems, where single components affect the other elements of the set. Systems thinking is thought to integrate all five disciplines into an organized structure as seen in the picture 3. (Garvin, Edmondson & Gino 2008, 109; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)



Picture 3. Dimensions of learning organisation according to Senge (1995, 6-10).

In more recent research, the Senge’s five disciplines are considered very important principles, but also critiqued to be overlapping, co-dependant and very difficult to evaluate in practice (Vuorinen 2013, 177). In this development work, the evaluation of organisational learning is essential as the focus is on researching the unit-level competencies and their development from the point of view of RBV of strategy. But as Senge’s five dimensions are already considered impractical in previous research, I investigated other applications of learning organisations.

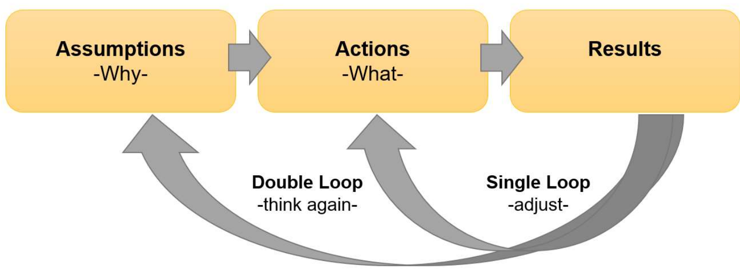
Garvin et al. (2008, 109) continued Senge’s work and identified three pillars or building blocks of learning organisations that can be further evaluated in practice. They have simplified and defined the building blocks of a learning organisation as **1.)** Learning supporting environment. **2.)** Concrete learning processes and structures. **3.)** Learning re-enforcing leadership (see picture 4.). This model has been used by multiple organisations as an evaluation tool and deemed a more practical approach. (Garvin et al. 2008, 109; Vuorinen 2013, 177.)

Picture 4. The building blocks of learning organisation according to Garvin et al. (2008,109).

The first pillar of learning supporting environment in Garvin et al.'s model (2008, 109) is referred to as learning culture (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 380) or as psychological safety (Edmondson 2008, 62) in relevant literature. Research show that organisations benefit from a learning culture, where the employees' psychological safety and their accountability for meeting demanding goals are equally high. Some characteristics of a learning culture are self-managed learning, long term competency building and employee empowerment. Psychological safety also refers to such learning supporting environments, where errors are not demonized, and the employees are emotionally and socially safe when asking questions, presenting, and testing their own ideas, and when failing in their endeavours and experimentations. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 380; Edmondson 2008, 62-67; Garvin et al. 2008, 109.)

The second pillar of learning organisations consist of concrete learning processes and practices that nurture the individual and unit-level competencies. From the literature it comes apparent, that all organisations learn naturally, but they need systematic organizational learning approaches and structures to gain the ability for systematic and strategic learning and development. These processes and practices cover structures for analysing learning needs, opportunities for workplace learning, formal training & education, personal development planning and evaluation as well as structures for supporting ideation together with cyclical practices of experimenting and testing of new ideas. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 396-415; Basten & Haamann 2018, 1; Garvin et al. 2008, 109.)

In the literature, the organisational learning process is often characterised through a three-stage process consisting of knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and shared implementation. The depth and reach of learning also differ between organisations, which can be best visualized through the original idea of Chris Argyris & Donald Schön (1978) double loop learning theory seen in the picture 5. below. (Viitala & Jylhä 2019, Chapter 1.)



Picture 5. Double loop learning theory according to Argyris and Schön 1992 (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 381).

Single -loop (also called adaptive or superficial or routine) learning is gradual learning that corrects variations from the norm by making small modifications and improvements without challenging any underlying assumptions or decisions. In other words, the learning takes place in the organisation's current thought patterns and operational models. Organisation's that follow single loop learning are said to govern variables, which means defining assumptions such as targets and standards and then monitoring and reviewing results to take adjustive action where needed. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 381; Viitala & Jylhä 2019, Chapter 1.)

Double -loop (also called generative or deep or renewing) learning involves an extra loop of challenging assumptions, beliefs and norms and decisions rather than accepting them as they are. A problem may lead to questioning and renewing the existing thought patterns and operational models. In practice this means that learning takes place through the examination of core causes of problems. The second new loop goes far deeper and is more radical in comparison to the single loop learning. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 381; Viitala & Jylhä 2019, Chapter 1.)

On top of these two loops, there is also the third learning loop called the “deutero-learning- loop”, which refers to an organisation’s structures to learn to learn. Through the third loop, the organisation has processes and practices that enable assessment, adaptation, and renewal of its own abilities to renew its thought patterns and operational models. This sort of organisation that possesses and nurtures learning structures and processes through all the three loops would be close to execution-through-learning -approach that is the ultimate ideal of continuously learning organisations, where learning is in the heart of the organisation’s competitiveness. (Edmondson 2008, 62; Viitala & Jylhä 2019, Chapter 1.)

The third building block of learning organisations is learning reinforcing leadership, which means that learning is strongly influenced by the behaviour of its leaders. In practice this means that when the leaders demonstrate readiness to learn and engage in dialogue and debate, the other members in an organisation are encouraged by their example. Leaders that spend time on problem identification, knowledge transfer, and reflective post-audits spread similar practices throughout the organisation. This approach to leadership positions the leaders as coaches, facilitators and effective and transparent communicators and debaters that empower individual, unit level and organisation level learning while keeping the strategic goals clear to everyone. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 420; Garvin et al. 2008, 109.)

The three-pillar model embraces same concepts as Senge’s five dimensions but is more clearly structured and available as a ready-made evaluation tool, which very well suits the resources of this development work. The before-mentioned three pillars or blocks are all considered important aspects of analysing a sales unit’s organisational learning capabilities and can be considered as a valid bases for development work.

As a conclusion, a learning organisation is a notion that can be considered a strategic management tool and a value structure that steers an organisation’s efforts to gain strategic advantage over its competitors through the development of HRC. The original concept of learning organisation is multidimensional, and impractical to measure or implement to practice. The research on learning organisation has evolved into covering a more analytical diagnosis of different aspects or building blocks of learning organisations that present more concrete avenues for understanding and developing learning organisations. There is still a gap between, what to learn and how to make it happen in practice, the development work is solely based on the learning organisation- analysis.

The perspective of the learner and actual methods how learning takes place in organisations do not belong to this concept but need to be studied separately. For this reason, and to complement the theoretical proposition, I will investigate organisational learning and development in the chapter 2.3. Based on the literature, there is no real negative implications of being a learning organisation from the point of view of competitiveness of an organisation, or at least they have not yet been studied at large.

2.3 Organisational Learning and Development

In this chapter, organisational learning and development is investigated in more detail to gain more understanding on how the development of HRC takes place on unit and individual levels in organisations. This is an important aspect for this research, when all three levels of learning and development in organisations are researched for the development purposes.

Learning and development are here defined as an organisation's process of enabling employees to learn specific skills to drive better business performance through upskilling or reskilling existing personnel. In addition, organisational learning describes how people learn in organisations which is crucial from the point of view of effectiveness. (Garvin et al. 2008, 109; Matthews & Brueggemann 2015, 337-338; Mulder 207, 84; 86-88; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36-37.)

Learning and development programs and processes have different purposes in organisations. The objective may be, e.g., to improve business performance, employee satisfaction and retention, or employer branding. In this research, the focus is on business performance as the topic of research focuses on sales competencies driving increased sales performance as part of internal resource configuration.

Modern learning and development practices rely on the assumption that an organisation's goal-oriented development processes facilitate an employee to integrate and possess new competencies that come apparent in their behaviour that helps them to perform qualitatively well in their job domain and meet the required targets. An additional point of view can be found in recent research results, where employees are researched to focus on developing competencies that aim at compensating their lack of expertise in complex job domains through tools like computer programs and technological aids that extend an individual’s competency portfolio or expertise levels indirectly. (Garvin et al. 2008, 109; Matthews & Brueggemann 2015, 337-338; Mulder 207, 84; 86-88; Sydänmaanlakka 2017, 36-37.)

In this research, this aspect was not taken into focus since the emphasis is on researching how the target organisation can support the development of expertise instead of how an individual lacking expertise manages complex tasks creatively

Organisational learning is strongly linked with the adult learning theory, or the so called andragogical process model. Other main theories of learning are behaviourism, humanism, cognitivism, and constructivism, but they concern mainly the learning of children and youths. The adult learning principles are originally developed by Malcolm Knowles and shared through his work “Andragogy, not pedagogy” from the year 1968. Knowles saw adult learning as a process of gaining knowledge and expertise, which has some differences in comparison to the learning process of a child. Organisational adult learning has two attributes: the organisational context and the perception of learning as desired outcome. Both assumptions hold true in this development work as well. (Knowles et al. 2015, 155.)

There are six adult learning principles that are considered impassable and integrated parts of designing learner-centric learning and development structures and practices in work organisations. These principles are: **1.)** Adults need to know, why they should be learning something and what are the benefits of learning. **2.)** Adult learners feel responsibility over their own decisions, which makes them self-directing learners. This causes them to resent situations, where others are imposing learning on them. **3.)** Adult learners’ prior experiences are part of their identities, which means that there is a vast range of individual differences amongst any group of adults. Adults themselves are a significant source of learning. **4.)** Adults’ readiness to learn develops through gradual stages toward mastery. An example often found in literature are five stages of mastery: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. **5.)** Adults have different orientations to learning like task- or problem- centred learning. **6.)** Adults tend to have potent internal drivers or motivations to learn. (Knowles et al. 2015, 43-47, 155; Mulder 2017, 86-88.)

In literature, learning is divided into formal, non-formal and informal learning that are all avenues for developing professional expertise. Formal learning means participating in conventional training events and development programs, and it is considered especially efficient in producing general skills applicable to various situations. Non-formal learning refers to purposefully organised work-related learning activities like mentoring or skills practice programs. Informal learning refers to non-structured learning that takes place as a side effect of working. Informal learning is an implicit and often unconscious process of adopting tacit knowledge through accumulating experiences, and now it is considered a very important aspect of learning especially in more demanding expert and managerial roles. In some prior research, the line between formal and non-formal may obscure time to time and should be determined in each context separately. (Mulder 2017, 91-92; Viitala 2021, Chapter 3.6.)

The andragogical process model for formal and non-formal learning in organisations includes the steps of preparing the learner, establishing a climate conductive to learning, creating a mechanism of mutual planning, diagnosing the needs for learning, formulating objectives to satisfy the needs, designing a pattern of learning experiences, conducting learning experiences with suitable techniques and materials and evaluating learning outcomes which is followed by a new diagnosis of learning needs. (Knowles et al. 2015, 51.)

This cyclical process model of adult learning is close to the values and prerequisites of learning organisations and deutero-learning loop, where learning structures, psychologically safe environment and supportive leadership are supporting the continuous learning and renewal of an organisation.

There are plenty of literature and research listing different designs and methods to facilitate learning. Some terms and vocabulary may have some differences depending on the source in use. For the purposes of this study, I compiled development and learning methods from literature to ten different categories (see also attachment 5.).

These main categories are **1.)** Face-to-face trainer input training, which can take form of expert lead presentations, seminars, demonstrations, group discussions or workshops, videos, and speakers. **2.)** Learner activities, which comprise programmed and structured learning activities for learners like warm-ups and games, written exercises, case studies, manuals, real work examples, brainstorming, preparing, and delivering presentations, knowledge tests, quizzes, role-plays or try-outs, skills practice, individual analysis, self-reflection, and action planning. **3.)** On-job learning**,** which is often informal and takes place during real work activities. **4.)** One-to-One coaching, which offers non-directive support from a designated coach to support a learner to develop and apply their competencies. **5.)** One-to-one mentoring**,** which offers more directive support from a more experienced person, who can advise and help a learner to apply their competencies. **6.)** Peer learning or action learning sets, also called group peer mentoring, which means peers or groups of peers meeting to support each other through work projects and to share learnings and ideas. **7.)** Online learning modules like e-learning and e-portfolios that offer avenues for learners to manage own learning. **8.)** Learner-generated content, which refers to learners finding and uploading relevant resources about certain themes, usually these resources are gathered into a messaging platform or LMS that can be accessed by a certain learner group. **9.)** Online or social media-based discussion forums like chat rooms, messaging hubs, forums, or social media platforms such as Twitter or Slack that support learner communication and networking. **10.)** Webinars or Virtual Classrooms, which are a form of trainer input trainings**.** All and all, the theory does not offer any universal answers for developing certain competencies but rather transfers the focus from organisation-lead competency development to more employee-driven, learner-centric collaboration scenes that support the adult learning process. (Bailey, Mankin, Kelliher & Garavan 2018, 212; Beevers, Rea, & Hayden 2020, 103-104; Knowles et al. 2015, 87; Marcos Cuevas, Lemmens & Donaldson 2016, 221-222; Viitala 2021, Chapter 3.6.)

Learning and development practices rely on measuring the effect of selected methods of learning. Based on prior research, the whole designing process of any formal training program must be evaluated. In literature, Kirkpatrick's (1998) four assessment levels are the most often referred means of evaluating competency development programs. Kirkpatrick's model measures first a learner's reaction to training. Secondly their learning of knowledge, skills, and changes in attitudes. Third their behaviour and how the learned matters come to be routine practices on the job after three and six months. And finally, the fourth measurement of the results, which can be any, and all the outcomes that follow competency development efforts. (Attia & Honeycut 2012, 325, 335; Beevers et al. 2020, 103-104; Marcos Cuaves et al. 2016, 223.)

The researchers consider the first two levels of measurement to be relatively easily measured as they can be done during and right after the learning but measuring changes in behaviour and measuring results require involvement of immediate supervisors and careful planning in more long-term arrangements. Result related value measurements can, e.g., cover aspects of the changes in the value and numbers of sales and customers, number of sales activities reported, or the degree of sales covering company costs like the expenses and commissions related to sales. (Attia & Honeycut 2012, 325, 335; Beevers et al. 2020, 103-104; Marcos Cuaves et al. 2016, 223.)

Learning in work organisations happens at least informally, without actual conscious effort from the learners themselves like through the on-job learning or through participating in communication in social platforms. It is often seen that unless a learning event is linked with a certain competency gap by the learner, the learning event and learning process may feel unrelated and unimportant and go unnoticed by the learner, which hinders the development of specific success competencies hindering simultaneously the development of competitiveness. (Viitala 2021, Chapter 3.6.)

As a conclusion, it can be stated that learning and development of competencies in organisations is happening all the time in multiple of forms even without any concrete learning and development structures in place. Based on the RBV of strategy that enhances the development of strategically important configuration of resources, the learning must have a certain identified and measurable goal, but the actual methods of learning can be wide and varied.

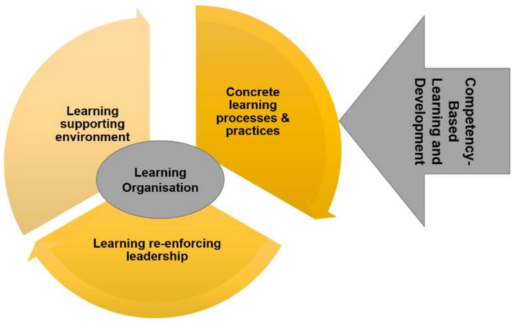
How to identify the learning and development needs of an individual or unit, is not solved through the organisational learning and development theories. The need to identify and map competency gaps is crucial for goal-oriented learning and development. In competency-based learning and development models, the theory refers to competency frameworks for analysing learning needs (Sanghi 2016, 91).

2.4 Competency Frameworks

In this subchapter, I study competency frameworks, or namely, competency models. Competency frameworks are essential aspect of organisational learning and development processes than aim at addressing identified gaps in competencies on an individual and unit level. Identifying competencies and competency levels is an important aspect this development work in the context of RBV of strategy. Based on the RBV of strategy, only the HRC that influence the competitiveness must be continuously developed. Hence competency frameworks are needed to link strategic goals to learning and development goals.

In literature, a competency framework is seen as a result of continuous social process of compiling negotiated meanings that include the inputs of all the stakeholders. They can be maybe best described as normative agreements in a work organisation and seen as an important combining tool in this development project. (Bailey et al. 2018, 212; Profiroiu & Hurdubei 2018, 114; Sanghi 2016, 91)

According to the notion of learning organization that is the principal tool of HRC development according to the RBV of strategy, the competency development frameworks are categorised as part of the concrete learning processes and practices pillar of learning organisations that was mentioned in the previous chapter about learning organisations (see picture 6. below).



Picture 6. Competency-based learning and competency frameworks as part of concrete learning processes and practices according to Garvin et al.’s (2008, 109) model of learning organisations

The competency development frameworks are founded on competency profiles. These profiles depict the identified competencies that drive performance and are either generic, individual or role specific (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 166-167). The role specific profiles match the purposes of this development project as sales competencies are also sales role- specific in the target organisation. The sales role is a clearly identified role in the target organisation for a group of people that work in the same unit. As the sales role differs from other roles in the target organisation e.g., from the R&D roles, it is justified to use role-based profile instead of general or individual competency profiles.

Role profiles are used to map and assess the levels of competencies achieved by an individual and to identify their learning and development needs or competency gaps in comparison to a certain role requirements and metrics. Based on the theory, the gaps can be between skill levels like when there is a need to develop expertise in already existing competencies, or the gaps may address a need to gain some entirely new competencies. Prior research show that many new competency gaps stem from the increasing complexity of modern jobs and emphasize intellectual and learning related competencies and the same can be expected from the results of this research. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 166-167; Beevers et al. 2020, 70, 76; Marcos Cuevas et al. 2016, 224; Mulder 2017, 83; Otala 2018, 22.)

The relevant literature divides the competency models roughly into three different types. The traditional models are based on personal attributes and behavioural repertoires, which aim at identifying constant and generic competencies that differentiate top performers from less successful ones by identifying superior sets of attributes. According to some later research, these generic models fail in demonstrating how the identified competencies are integrated into work performance, or if, and how, the employees use these attributes in work. These limitations have led to the third and more evolved extension of competency models, the situationalist or interpretative approach for competency modelling. (Getha-Taylor, Blackmar & Borry 2016; 306-307; Woodruffe 1993, 32-33; Lo, Macky & Pio 2015, Sandberg 2000, 10-11; Mulder 2017, 236-237.)

The situationalist competency modelling supports especially the strategy of a unit or an organisation by focusing on context-specific competencies or so-called situated professionalism. This approach places an employees' experiences of work and their professional expertise to a more fundamental role than their generic attributes. (Getha-Taylor et al. 2016, 306-307; Woodruffe 1993, 32-33; Lo et al. 2015, Sandberg 2000 10-11; Mulder 2017, 236-237.)

For the needs of this project work, the situationalist approach would also support the context driven aspects of the complex ecosystem in the field of environmental technology, which is a very important aspect for the target organisation.

Sengupta et al. (2013, 507) have studied several competency frameworks in business use and identified that the trend is to develop rather thorough competency models instead of using more generic ones. This trend tends to increase the rare and non-substitutable aspects of resources according to the RBV of strategy, but also simultaneously grow the complexity of any competency framework. These situationalist models are used to integrate an organisation's current and future business objectives and individual competencies together with their mastery levels. The same research also shows that any competency model-based management system tended to yield competitive benefits to an organisation in any case. (Sengupta et al. 2013, 507.)

In literature, it is often highlighted that to identify of a competency profile for especially learning and development framework needs, both the employee and the management must continuously negotiate about the clear consensus of the competency requirements of the role. It is considered that the clarity of competencies, their relation to competitiveness and the clarity of description of observable behaviours correlate with an organisation's ability to evaluate and develop these competencies. (Karapidis 2018, 76; Kupias, Peltola & Pirinen 2014, Chapter 2.)

The situationalist competency framework creation process consists of careful steps. There are some small variations in the process definition that can be found from different sources. For the purposes of this paper, I have selected a recent and all- encompassing process description by Sanghi (2016, 91), which is also in accordance with the same description by Armstrong & Taylor (2020, 168).

The first phase of the process defines the purposes and performance objectives of the targeted role. The second phase is the identification of competencies and behaviours that predict and describe desired performance. The third phase is the validation of competencies that takes place before the fourth phase of implementing and integrating the competency development practices to practice. Final the fifth phase ensures that the competency framework is a living structure, which means that the competencies can be updated together with the strategy. (Armstrong & Taylor 2020, 168; Sanghi 2016, 91.)

The process model of competency framework creation can be considered to be in line with the changing nature of resource configuration in RBV of strategy. In this development project, the three first steps are taken to implementation as this development work is intended to cover the plan for the implementation without the actual execution part.

Critic in general, can be aimed at the process of creating competency models if the competencies are researched solely by an outsider without actual assistance from the targeted people. In these cases, the models tend to turn out too general, irrelevant, and detached from the operational level of work and the employees do not see how the model depicts their everyday tasks. In prior research, there has also been competency models that lack the future orientation aspect, which is often considered to reflect managements' lack of understanding of their own business needs. In some cases, the research has shown that competency models have been too heavy and complex making them exceedingly difficult to apply. (Getha-Taylor et al. 2016, 316; Karapidis 2018, 73; Kupias et al. 2014, Chapter 2; Sengupta et al. 2013, 523.)

As a summary, one could say that the trending and mainstream competency frameworks or models are often role-specific and situationalist. Their efficiency is increased through the active participation of all the stakeholders in the process, but a model's efficacy can still be more dependent on its correct application than on its actual design, content or designing process. (Kupias et al. 2014, Chapter 2; Sengupta et al. 2013, 507.)

In literature, the researchers highlight that for each specific case, there needs to be a determined balance between the level of accuracy in describing the desired competencies and behaviour repertoires, and in guaranteeing the usability of the model itself. It also becomes apparent, that even the best competency frameworks may have only a fleeting timespan as the desired competency portfolios change together with changing business environments. (Karapidis 2018, 73; Kupias et al. 2014, Chapter 2.)

It can also be concluded that the typical competency framework process aligns well with the qualitative case study research approach that aims at an in depth and contemporary data collection and analysis of the phenomenon from the point of view of targeted people

2.5 Sales Competencies

In this subchapter, I finalise the theoretical framework of this development project, by investigating prior research concerning sales competencies that can be linked to successful sales performance. At the time of this development project, I was unable to find research of sales competencies in environmental technology field that relies on complex partnerships in service agreement execution, but I assume that there are some similarities with some expert level sales competency research. There are several relevant research on sales competencies, and I have chosen some of them as benchmarks for this research.

Based on a meta-analysis study of sales performance research from 1982-2008, the competencies driving sales performance on an individual level can be divided into six categories **1.)** Role perceptions. **2.)** Aptitude. **3.)** Skill level. **4.)** Motivation. **5.)** Personal factors. **6.)** Organizational and environmental and their subcategories. The same study showed through a combined bivariate and multivariate analysis that there are five sales drivers that have an independent predictive effect on sales performance. These determinants were in order of their importance: **1.)** Selling-related knowledge, **2.)** degree of adaptiveness, **3.)** role ambiguity, **4.)** cognitive aptitude, and **5.)** work engagement. The study also concluded that the measurement methods, research contexts and the nature of sales in each case influenced the causal relation between a determinant and salesperson's performance. This means that although this meta-analysis can be used as a benchmark for any sales competency study, but it cannot be used as a universal bases for a sales role profile. (Verbeke et al. 2011, 408, 418, 421.)

Based on more recent research, like the one by Terho et al. in 2015 about sales strategy's impacts on sales performance, the focus of selling practices is shifting from operational toward strategic level sales. This shift enhances the strategic position of sales unit in organisations. On individual level this means that salespeople find themselves in more knowledge-sensitive and consultative sales roles, where the value is co-created together with the customers. This means that the core of the business lies in recognizing and understanding customer needs and offering overall services to fulfil these needs. (Helander, Kujala, Lainema & Pennanen 2013, 12; Terho et al. 2015, 12-21.)

From salespeople this change requires keen commercial thinking and competencies for managing entities in relation to customers' expectations and needs as well as competencies for managing own organisation's competences and operational structures. In the target company, the salespeople have long held an important role but due to the servitising of business and complex partnership ecosystem, their role has been shifting to the strategic level that was previously reserved to production and R&D. (Helander et al. 2013, 12; Terho et al. 2015, 12-21.)

In addition to sales competency discussion, Inuzuka's (2020, 105-114) recent study about adaptive selling behaviour argues that defining and understanding the competencies of successful salespeople has remained difficult and context driven throughout all the years of its research. Inuzuka (2020, 105) claims that drawing the line between average and successful salespeople based on their abilities has proven to be challenging, which has led to the belief that success in sales means adaptation, which can be explained as an ability to adopt and to apply sales competencies to any given situation. Based on this belief, researching the top performers' and average performers' competencies in the target company should bring similar results.

Terho et al. (2015, 15) share this thought and conclude further in their study that the one differentiating individual-level determinant driving sales performance is, in fact, customer orientation. Customer orientation in turn is researched to enable value-based selling in practice and that the top performing salespeople can act and behave competently even in unexpected situations instead of just having competencies. (Aušra, Birutė & Danguolė 2019, 48; Terho et al. 2015, 15.)

Kurlan's (2020, 56-58) data driven research analysis of 1,942,180 raises yet another additional point of view to the discussion of sales competencies. This study pointed out that goal-orientated salespeople were able to score the highest in every researched sales competency category. Kurlan's (2020, 56-58) study was also able to draw a line between unsuccessful and successful salespeople. According to Kurlan's results, 83% of the top performing salespeople write down personal goals while the corresponding percentage is only 44% amongst the less successful salespeople in the research sample. According to the same research, 76% of the top performing salespeople also designed a concrete plan for reaching their goals while the corresponding figure amongst the less successful salespeople was only 25%.

Based on the recent research, salespeople's competencies are strongly affected by changing and evolving trends. According to Sisakhti (2015, 56-59) such influencing trends include the rise of empowered buyers, the salesforce verticalization, the solution and insight selling, the blurring lines between sales and marketing, the hybrid sales models, the on-demand availability, the omnipresent social media, the analytics-based prospecting, the multigeneration sales, selling to customer teams, the globalization of teams and customer base, new learner insights and the emergence of integrated learning environments. These new trends require a variety of competencies from salespeople from abilities of establishing a social media presence and tracking customer's digital footprints to optimized mobile learning skills. Still the understanding, if any of these competencies have a distinguishing effect between a successful and average salesperson cannot be considered straightforward. (Sisakhti 2015, 56-59.)

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To conclude it can be stated that sales competencies are a continuous topic of research. They evolve and change with altering business environments, contexts and are dependent on the research focus, term definitions and research methods. As a summary of studies mentioned above, it could be said that sales competencies that drive sales performance encompass usually selling-related knowledge and skills, adaptiveness, cognitive aptitude, work engagement, goal orientation, customer orientation, systemic thinking, commercial thinking, and continuous learning abilities to mention a few. Similar competencies can be expected to be part of the sales competency profile of the target company.

It is also apparent that differentiating between the competencies of top and average performers may be challenging. Both groups may possess same competency portfolio, but have different meta-competencies, which refers to individuals' abilities to use these shared competencies in changing situations. Some researchers had also contradicting results about this and it becomes increasingly obvious that there is no consensus about universal sales success competencies and if these competencies differ amongst the salespeople of different performance level.

3 Research Design

In this chapter, I introduce the research design of this study including the research problem, the research questions, and the research objectives. I introduce the reader with the limitations and restrictions of this study, the research approach, the research methods, and the ethical questions concerning this research. Finally, I introduce the participating groups of this research.

3.1 Research Problem, Questions and Objectives

Initially, the purpose of this research was to gain in-depth understanding of the sales competencies and the development of these competencies at the target organisation. The research results were intended to support the development of HRC and thus the competitiveness of the target organisation in accordance with the RBV of strategy. During the research process, the purpose of the development work was further adjusted to include developing a suggestion for concrete learning and development processes and practices for unit and individual level competency-development that could be scaled to other critical units in the target organisation.

This study can be categorised as a research-based development work that was initiated to address the problems of sales performance, which influenced the long-term competitiveness of the target company. In practice, this means that the sales unit and the individual salespeople were not selling enough new service agreements and solution packages directly or indirectly through partner ecosystem as required based on the renewed strategic goals of the organisation. From this situation, it was inferred by the management that the strategically positioned salespeople lacked internal resources like sales competencies and expertise that would enable the organisation's sustainable growth and competitiveness in new and changing business environments. The management also acknowledged that they did not have the knowledge of the salespeople's current sales competencies and expertise levels, and how the organisation could strategically and continuously support learning and development of sales competencies to improve the internal configuration of resources.

The basic assumption of this development work is, that before proposing any solutions to this problem, there is a need to research and gain in-depth situational understanding about the salespeople's important sales competencies that drive high levels of sales performance, how these competencies are learned and developed in the first place, and how to develop learning and development in the target company.

From this research problem, the following research questions can be derived:

1. Which sales competencies are important to drive sales performance in the target organisation?
2. How do the salespeople learn and develop important competencies in the target organisation?
3. How to develop learning and development of competencies in individual and unit level?

According to the expectations of the target organisation, the development proposal based on the research results should be a scalable solution for systematically developing identified individual and unit-level competencies in order to support the needs of RBV of strategy. The research results should offer some insight of important learning and development needs in terms of employees' professional expertise that could be used for designing goal-oriented learning and development opportunities.

The following outcomes are expected from the development project:

- A compilation of identified sales competencies that can be seen to drive sales performance at the target organisation.
- A compilation of practices for developing the learning and development of sales competencies at the target company.
- A customised process for assessing individual and unit- level competencies that brings afront the learning and development needs

3.2 Research Scope

This research is limited to identifying and researching sales competencies, learning and development of sales competencies, and learning and development opportunities of the salespeople in the target organisation during the determined time span in 2020. The research is limited to selected participants that represent the management and salespeople of the target organisation at the time of this research.

This development project is based on principles of the RBV of strategy, but the development project does not focus on tangible or intangible resource groups and only concentrates on HRC. The purpose of this research is not to create a universal HRC framework for any competency development endeavours, but rather bring more insight about sales competencies and their development process as part of internal resource configuration through a single case example of the theoretical framework. This research focuses on investigating how to continuously develop unit-level internal resources and salespeople's individual competencies that will positively reflect to the performance of the organisation and thus the overall competitiveness. This research is not originally conducted for the purposes of e.g., recruitment, selection, rewarding, career, or succession planning, although it may be applicable to these purposes after some thought and further research.

This research does not cover the implementation, integration nor the evaluation of the development proposal. Such things and the further possible applications of this framework are instructed to be conducted by the management of the target organisation and other researchers. The effects of other organisational structures supporting sales performance optimization and organisational learning like, for example, performance management practices, KPI's, product and service portfolios, monitoring, rewarding systems and recruitment are not included as variables in this research.

3.3 Research Approaches

The research approaches are research problem or development area dictated general frameworks or methodologies of how to proceed with the selected research. In literature, these research methodologies are basically divided into qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The qualitative research methodology is material-based, inductive, from practice- to- theory approach that typically aims at achieving understanding, what a phenomenon is about and for outlining the research topic from the point of view of the participants. A quantitative research methodology is theory-based, deductive, from theory-to- practice approach that aims at wider generalisation and forecasting. (Kananen 2013, 24; Puusa, Juuti & Aaltio 2020, Chapter 1.)

For the purposes of this development work, the quantitative methodology that is purely theory-based is not a valid match as the emphasis is more on gaining in-depth and context driven results from the point of view of the targeted people. This study that focuses on a certain case, is more in line with the qualitative research approach. On the other hand, this research cannot purely be considered material based as it would benefit from existing theories that could be used to guide this research.

In between these two main research approaches, there are design, action, and case study -research strategies. They are often in literature referred to as research strategies instead of separate methodologies as they benefit both from the quantitative and qualitative research methods. In literature, they are the so-called multi-method or mixed-method research approaches. They are considered abductive approaches as they are based on interaction between research materials and relevant theory. (Kananen 2013, 24, 30; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 1; Yin 2014,16, 18; Woodside 2017, 6.)

The design research strategy aims at creating change or intervention and thus it includes implementation, testing, and evaluation of the intervention in practice that are outside the scope of this development project. The action research approach similarly aims at influencing the research target and enabling change or intervention, while the researcher is also an active operator in the research process. The case study strategy can include a single case, or multiple cases, which are researched to grasp profound understanding of a contemporary phenomenon. In case study approach the researcher is considered an active participant of the research process but has little or no control over behavioural events themselves. Based on these descriptions, the case study approach is more in line with the purpose and scope of this development work, where there is a need to build people-centric insight of strategic sales competencies and assemble a suitable competency framework for the RBV of strategy needs of the target company. In the following chapter 3.3.1, I will investigate the case study strategy in more detail for the purposes of this project work. (Kananen 2013, 24, 30; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 1; Yin 2014,16, 18; Woodside 2017, 6.)

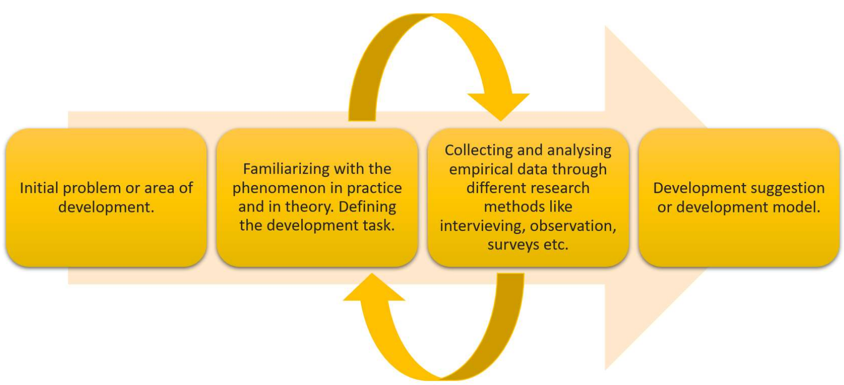
3.3.1 Case study strategy

According to some researchers, a case-study approach is considered a subcategory of qualitative research while others consider it an independent strategy that has just much in common with qualitative research approach. The case study definition is two-fold**: 1.)** It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon, the “case”, in its real-world and natural context especially, if the phenomenon and context cannot be clearly separated. **2.)** It is an inquiry that deals with situations, where there are more interesting variables than actual data points, which results in reliance on several sources of evidence, with data assembled through triangulation. It also means that it uses prior theoretical suggestions to guide data collection and analysis. (Kananen 2013, 24; Yin 2014,16-18.)

In relevant literature, the case study approach is linked to different epistemological orientations that reflect the researcher’s belief system about the nature and acquisition of knowledge. This orientation can be seen in efforts of researching and interpreting the perceptions of the targeted people. In practice, it means focusing on the stakeholders’ perceptions, experiences and subjective mental models of important sales competencies and their continuous learning and development at the target organisation. (Kananen 2019, 26; Yin 2014, 17.)

This particular development project is oriented toward an accommodating relativist perspective, which acknowledges multiple realities having multiple meanings with findings that are observer dependant.

A case-study research process can be divided into different phases also depicted in the picture 7. below. The case study-strategy is an abductive process, which is often a very iterative process that holds overlapping stages. The initial phase of the research process is the recognition of the research problem or area of development, which is followed by the researcher's familiarisation with the phenomenon in practice and in theory. This leads to defining the actual development task. The third phase covers the field activities of collecting and analysing primary research data through different research methods. The analysis of research materials enables the researcher to attain the final phase of the process that is the formulation and sharing of a development suggestion or a development model that is the expected outcome of research-based development projects. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, 53.)



Picture 7. Case study process according to Ojasalo et al. (2015, 53).

In prior research and literature, the case study -approach is often criticised because the research results from a case study research cannot be generalized to a larger population. On the other hand, a case study's objective is not to produce generalized information for the masses but to rather apply theoretical framework to a study case. This means that the results are still generalizable to theoretical propositions concluding to expansion and generalization of theories. Another aspect of criticism is aimed at a single-case study's focus on studying only a single, particular case in such a pedantic way, which may represent only a one-off context. The case study researchers, I included, have acknowledged this concern, and aim at using many informants and triangulation of sources to minimize the possibility of producing only singular, one-off results. (Woodside 2017, 9; Yin 2014, 20-21.)

Some researchers have questioned, if the case study approach is rigorous enough as there is less methodological literature to steer case study researchers, but this situation is developing all the time due to the popularity of case studies. At the time of this development project, there was already plenty of prior peer reviewed research and academic literature specializing in case studies like the books by Robert K. Yin, who has for over 20 years been one of the most cited authors of research methodologies. (Yin 2014, 20-21.)

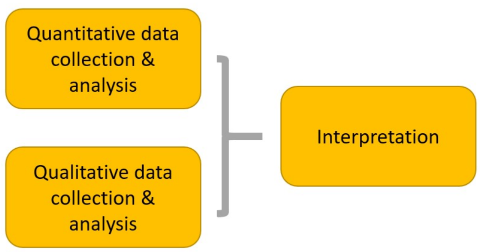
Some researchers also warn that the case study -concept can also be misunderstood and confused with case studies used in teaching. In case studies for teaching purposes an alteration can be made to demonstrate or highlight a certain point. Such unscientific practice is strictly forbidden in case study research and all the evidence must be reported fairly. Case study strategies have in cases required unmanageable levels of effort and time, which can be avoided by planning and by careful selection of research methods that influence the efficiency and efficacy of the research process. (Yin 2014, 20-21.)

Finally, there is also criticism presented about the unclear comparative advantage of case studies, which means that as case studies are nonexperimental research approaches, it is impossible to establish the effectiveness of various interventions. It can still be argued that case studies are well suited for offering important insights in answering “how” and “why” questions in depth, which is also the most important objective of this development work. (Mills & Birks 2014, Chapter 3, Chapter 9; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 2.2; Yin 2014, 19-22.)

As a conclusion, a case study research is an abductive, iterative, and flexible qualitatively oriented research approach that combines different methodologies. It is especially suited for development-oriented works and the target of research may be a single case or multiple cases. Case studies have their weaknesses, but through careful planning all of them can be addressed beforehand. Just like qualitative research methodology, a case study approach offers depth and specificity. But in addition, it also offers breadth and diversity in terms of methods of data collection and analytical techniques and offers the possibility of several different layers of analysis. This can be of interest in in development work which focuses and assembles multiple different perspectives with the added benefit of triangulation of the research results. (Mills & Birks, 2014, Chapter 3; Ojasalo et al. 2015, 35-37; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 1; Yin 2014, 9.)

3.4 Research Methods

Research methods are specific procedures for collecting and analysing data. Case study strategy is a mixed-method approach meaning that it benefits both from qualitative and quantitative research methods (see picture 8.) to produce a holistic account of the research problem. The quantitative and qualitative components of the research can be integrated in any phase of the process, but the integration does not need to be evenly distributed. Case study research can be qualitatively dominant or qualitatively driven while quantitative components are added as supporting elements. (Kananen 2019, 27-30.)



Picture 8. Quantitative and qualitative research methods as part of interpretation according to Kananen (2019, 27).

This specific case study has much in common with the qualitative research methodology, which follows certain principals that are also characteristics to this research-based development project. Kananen (2019, 26) emphasises that empirical research takes place in the natural context of the phenomenon and the research data is collected in interaction with the concerned parties, which makes the researcher an active participant that generates, collects, and analyses data from multiple different sources like from observation and interviews. Based on the qualitative research methodology, the collection and analysis of the data follow each other in turns making the analysis a recursive event. This means that after a data analysis is done, more data is collected and analysed until there is enough analysed data to make an interpretation of the research material (Kananen 2019, 26).

In literature, the research data collection is divided into the collection of secondary or primary data. The secondary data can be, e.g., already existing texts, recordings, videos, pictures, and websites. The primary research material is data that is especially collected through fieldwork to solve a particular research problem. The primary research data is often gathered from people, who are linked with the researched phenomenon. The selection of the researched people must be well justified based on the research problem, but the amount of required research activities like participant interviews cannot be predetermined as the saturation point comes apparent only during the process itself. (Kananen 2019, 27-30; Puusa et al. 2020, Introduction; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 3.)

The secondary sources of data available for this research are the academic literature that is use for building the theoretical framework for this development project. This is peer-reviewed academic literature related to research problems. The other secondary sources of data are the target organisation’s strategy documents, open vacancy descriptions and development discussion templates that contain more data about the strategy, sales competencies, and the development opportunities in the target company. They present the so-called “grey literature” that is not peer-reviewed. These documents are analysed critically keeping in mind, who created the document, when and for what purposes.

For gathering primary data, I decided to use a small quantitative survey that contained a set of existing benchmark results. The purpose of such a method in this rather qualitative research case is to gather standardised, numerical, and comparable data to support the qualitative research results, to clarify the starting point of this development work and to create a baseline of comparison for evaluating effectiveness of changes taking place the future. This method is investigated in more detail in the subchapter 3.4.1.

For the purposes understanding the sales competencies and organisational learning, I take advantage of 1-to-1 and focus group theme interviews and observation that are important qualitative research methods for gaining people-oriented, multifaceted, and contextual data.

As for primary data collected through qualitative methods, it is crucial to find out about the management’s and salespeople’s own perceptions of sales competencies driving strategic sales performance and learning and development in the organisation. This assumption positions interviewing as the most important and even as the only possible method of collecting relevant and credible primary data from this perspective. Interviews are well supported in the research method literature concerning case studies and they fit well the purpose of collecting in- depth and multifaceted information. Interviews as a method of collecting data are further explained in the subchapter 3.4.2.

To complement the results of the interviews, I use systematic observation as an additional method for collecting qualitative primary data. The topics of interest in this case are the observable behaviors indicating sales competencies and learning and development related events in the sales unit. Sales competencies can be so deeply ingrained “silent information” and consist of unconscious habits and attitudes, which makes observation a valuable way to collect relevant data. It is also common that informal and non-formal learning goes sometimes unnoticed, which makes it important to observe firsthand how learning and development takes place in the organization in the absence of formal structures. Observation as a data collection method is further presented in the subchapter 3.4.3.

In any research, the data analysis is the phase that aims at increasing the information value of the collected research data by creating meaningful, clear, and unified information about the phenomenon. This analysis of the research data or materials is vital to create conclusions and suggestions about the phenomenon. Qualitative analysis of research material is based on logical thinking and interpretation, where the data is dismantled, conceptualized, and synthesized in a new way into a logically assembled entity. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.2.)

This case study research data describes the researched phenomenon, and the purpose of the analysis is to create a clear and verbal description of the phenomenon. Analysis of this sort of qualitative data can be roughly divided to two categories: 1. Analysis that is guided by a certain theoretical or epistemological position like e.g., Grounded Theory or phenomenological analysis. 2. Analysis that is not guided by theoretical or epistemological positions, but which can be relatively freely applied to different theoretical or epistemological bases. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.2.)

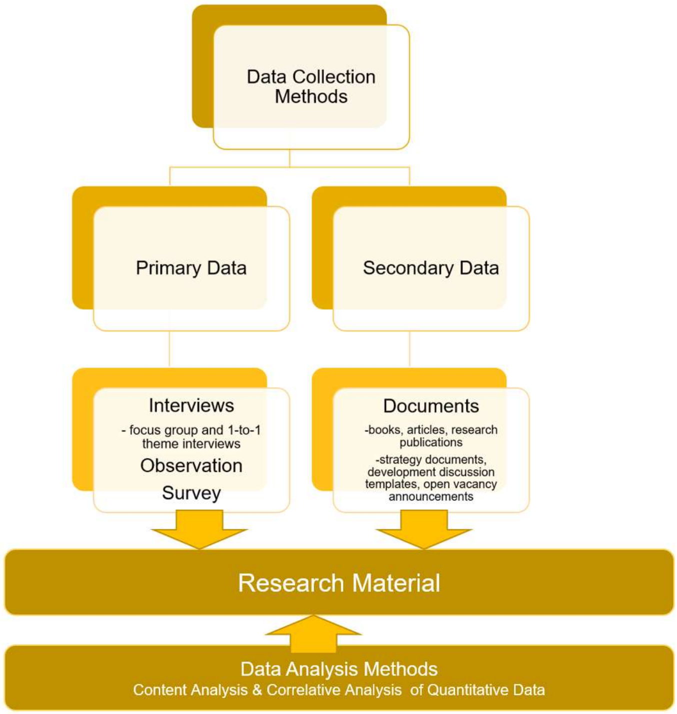
In literature, there are mentions of lists of thematic design, content analysis, quantification and typing techniques that can all be considered realistic analysis methods while, e.g., discourse analysis, narrative analysis, rhetorical analysis, and discussion analysis are considered linguistic approaches to analysis. Different analysis techniques can even be combined for the purposes of a case study research. Data analysis is conducted in all phases of the research process and influences the further research data collection. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.1- 4.4.2.)

For the purposes of this study, I selected the content analysis method that will be investigated in more detail in the subchapter 3.4.4. Most of the analysis of qualitative data falls under the content analysis framework if the purpose is to analyze data based on its content, which is the case in this case study research. To assemble an in-depth understanding of the sales competencies and their development in accordance with the RBV of strategy, the meaningful content needs to be extracted from the data. The purpose is to research human perceptions of reality instead of ultimate truth and the content analysis supports this purpose.

As mentioned before, the case study strategy is an abductive analysis approach combining theory and research materials. In this research, I rely on theory in steering my observations and organizing the research materials from the beginning on. There are existing categorizations and sales competency research results that can be well used as points of comparison for the purposes of this research. In other words, I use the theory-driven and so-called abductive analysis method, which is based on the inductive analyses, but which is also influenced by the theory. Abductive analyses are guided alternately by theory and material. In this development work, the themes of analysis emerge from the materials, but interpretation and grouping of themes are guided by the established theory. Theoretical guidance of this development work comes apparent as the conclusions are tied with prior research results and theories. (Puusa et al 2020, Chapter 9; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.1-4.2.)

In qualitative research the levels of research credibility and quality are increased through saturation, confirming informants, member checking the interpretation, outside sources and internal logic of the research (Kananen 2019, 31-33; Woodside 2017, 6). These reliability and validity methods are presented in the subchapter 3.4.5.

For this development work, the above-mentioned research methods are selected based on how they fitted the purpose of the research, their importance in case study strategy and availability of research resources. For example, any long-term, real-life observations were not possible to do in this case due to the limited time frame, Covid-19 restrictions, and long distances. On the other hand, a lot of importance was placed on interviews as they are described as the most valuable sources of information in accordance with the research topic and strategy. The overall plan of research methods of this case study research can be seen in the picture 9. below.



Picture 9. Research methods selected for this case study research.

3.4.1 Survey

A survey is a research method used for collecting data from a pre-defined group of respondents to gain information and insights on various topics of interest. In this study, a survey is used to distinguish the starting point of a qualitative development work and to create initial understanding of the phenomenon in its context. A survey means that a same thing is asked in a same way from a group of people, and it can be done through multiple media. Surveys may contain a mix of question types from closed option selections to open-ended responses, and many other variants in between. (Ojasalo et al. 2015, 40; Tight 2017, Chapter 9.)

Characteristics to a quantitative data collection method is that the data is gathered using structured and well-defined research instruments, the results are based on sample sizes that are representative of the population and the research study can be replicated or repeated, given its high reliability (Valli & Aarnos 2018, Chapter 1). In this case I use the

Garvin et al. (2008, 109) ready- made survey template. It is a three-part closed option selection type of online survey about sample member's own perceptions that are evaluated in a Likert scale. The three parts follow the three pillars of learning organisations, which is the principal tool for HRC development according to RBV of strategy. The parts in the survey are 1. Supporting learning environment, 2. Concrete learning processes and practices, and 3. Leadership that reinforces learning in their unit. The survey template can be found as an attachment (see attachment 1.)

There are two ways to use this survey. Either an individual takes the survey to get a sense of their work unit, or several members of a unit can each complete the survey and average their scores. In this case, I use the second approach as it suits better the purpose of analysing the state of learning in the unit level. The average scores from the sample are then compared with overall benchmark scores from the baseline scores embedded to the survey in question in a form of correlative analysis. The benchmark data is presented in quartiles, making it easy to position the average scores of the sample as seen in the picture 10. below. Comparison of scores makes it possible to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. The quantitative data from the survey is then analysed through an applied SWOT analysis, where the scores are considered to reflects the target unit's strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats in organisational learning. (Garvin et al. 2008, 109.)

	Scaled Scores				
Building Blocks and Their Subcomponents	Bottom quartile	Second quartile	Median	Third quartile	Top quartile
Supportive Learning Environment					
• Psychological safety	31–66	67–75	76	77–86	87–100
• Appreciation of differences	14–56	57–63	64	65–79	80–100
• Openness to new ideas	38–80	81–89	90	91–95	96–100
• Time for reflection	14–35	36–49	50	51–64	65–100
Learning environment composite	31–61	62–70	71	72–79	80–90
Concrete Learning Processes and Practices					
• Experimentation	18–53	54–70	71	72–82	83–100
• Information collection	23–70	71–79	80	81–89	90–100
• Analysis	19–56	57–70	71	72–86	87–100
• Education and training	26–68	69–79	80	81–89	90–100
• Information transfer	34–60	61–70	71	72–84	85–100
Learning processes composite	31–62	63–73	74	75–82	83–97
Leadership That Reinforces Learning					
Composite for this block	33–66	67–75	76	77–82	83–100

Picture 10. Scaled Scorecard in "Is Your's a Learning Organisation" survey according to Garvin et al. (2008, 109).

Even though in this study, the sample size is small and restricted, a survey is still classified as a quantitative data collection method as it emphasizes objective measurements and numerical analysis. This quantitative data collection method even in this relatively small population is a reasonable method as the diagnostic survey by Garvin et al. 2008 is created for this sort of purposes. These survey results can also be considered as pre-results of a larger scale survey, if the sample size will be increased later. In selecting my sample for this case, I follow the non-probability sampling process, where the researcher's knowledge and experience are used to create samples and due to this researcher involvement, not all the members of a target population have an equal probability of being selected. From the non-probability sampling methods, I use convenience sampling, where a sample is chosen due to sample's proximity to the researcher. These kinds of samples are quick and easy to implement as there is no other parameter of selection involved. In literature, it is stated that there is no correct answer about the right size of the sample, which is always dependant on the topic of research and the size of the population. (Valli & Aarnos 2018, Chapter 1.)

Garvin et al.'s (2008) survey is especially well suited for this case study as it holds default benchmark scores acquired from a collection of other companies. These benchmark scores offer a way to reflect organisational learning in a framework and in comparison, to a group of sample companies, which is valuable in cases like this, where a company's own baseline scores are missing. Organizations often need comparison points and insight on how a team's or individual's learning is contributing to the business in general and the publicly available and well proven survey created by Garvin et al. (2008, 109) can address this problem. (Basten & Haamann 2018, 1; Garvin et al. 2008, 109.)

Each salesperson's own survey scores are further discussed as part of one-to-one salespeople theme interviews and a compilation of all the survey scores is discussed with the management of the company. In this study the survey is used for gaining descriptive results, which means that it is used only once to give an idea of the present situation. The same survey tool can be used for experimental purposes in the target organisation, which refers to same measurements been taken before and after an intervention. This intervention is not included into the scope of this case study. This survey is conducted with a specific target audience group form the sales unit, but it can be conducted across multiple groups along with a more comparative quantitative analysis. (Valli & Aarnos 2018, Chapter 1.)

3.4.2 Interviews

Valli & Aarnos (2018, Chapter 1.) advice that if you wonder, what someone thinks about something, just ask them about it. Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research. This method aims at generating, collecting, and transcribing tangible sets of data about the perceptions and experiences of the participants to draw plausible conclusions about the research topic. (Mills & Birks 2014, Chapter 3.; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6; Valli & Aarnos 2018, Chapter 1.)

The methodical advantage of interviews in this case is that the participants can be purposefully selected for their topic related knowledge and experiences. In a well-designed interview, the interview questions and themes reflect the overall goals and process related tasks of the research, chosen interview methods and the theoretical framework of the research topic. The questions are also formulated concrete enough for each individual participant to answer them without having too in-depth understanding of the topical theoretical grounds or the research process. (Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.)

An interview is a flexible way of gathering information. The interviewee can be asked to further explain or to focus on something especially interesting during or even after the interview. A face-to-face interviewing also enables the observation of non-verbal communication like facial expressions, gestures, body movements, eye-contacts, intonations and pauses in speech that can be considered and even asked about during the interview. (Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6; Valli & Aarnos 2018, Chapter 1.)

The literature states that the research materials gathered through interviews are always highly subjective, time dependant and context driven since the analysis of interview data is always a researcher's personal interpretation of individual perceptions of others. In literature, interviews are seen as means of synthesizing statements of events from different time tenses; the past, the present, the future, and about events taking place in different locations making it a unique research method. (Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.).

In literature, interviews are often divided into structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews are carefully designed and goal-oriented lists of questions. In semi-structured interviews, the participants are not lead too much but are rather given the freedom to find their own answers that best reflect their experiences and opinions. The possible existence of a purely unstructured interview is only seen a theoretical possibility as most of the interviews have at least some sort of goals. (Hyvärinen et al. 2017, Chapter 6; Ojasalo et al. 2015, 41; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.)

Modern interviews are goal-oriented and purposeful discussions initiated and steered by researchers, which also turns them into social constructions. The outcome of an interview is affected by the participants influencing each other. These characteristics of interviewing place limitations on the generalization of interview results and push researchers toward more critical thinking and objectivity when interpreting interview results. For the purposes of this research, I interview several people through multiple formats from the management and sales and aim at synthesizing an objective and critically reviewed interpretation of interview data to benefit the research problem. (Hyvärinen et al. 2017, Chapter 1; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.).

In prior competency research, there have been some varied interviewing practices. Some researchers have used very structured interview templates, which aimed at mapping already known skills and mastery levels. In contrast, in cases, where the researched knowledge, skills and attitudes are not yet fully known, theme interviews have been recognized as the primary method for generating and collecting information. (Kupias et al. 2014, Chapter 2; Sanghi 2016, 5.)

In the research method literature, some researchers argue that the themes and/or interview questions should always be delivered to selected interviewees in advance to facilitate the generation of multifaceted information as much as possible. Others on the other hand argue that too much preliminary information may direct and limit the participants thoughts. Despite such disagreements, all the researchers agree that some preparations must be done before an interview. In this research, all the interviewees receive an introductory message, where the purpose and topics of the discussion are outlined in advance. The purpose is to give interviewees a chance to think about the topic. As self-preparation, I follow the recommendations from the recent literature and dedicate some time to consider possible altering courses or pain points that may occur during the interviews. I plan and practice for my interviewing role and design possible question lay-outs in advance. In literature, it is also encouraged to ponder how different interviewees may react to interview situations and how they may be affected by the knowledge that their answers are being recorded. I am also aware that some interviewees may give socially acceptable answers to certain themes or invent answers that they think will please me as the interviewer. (Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.)

Interviewing is criticised for over-relying on how participants see things instead of how participants do things. For this reason, I use multiple sources and methods of data generation and collection for creating more dimensions and depth for the research materials. Critics also point out that interviewing is often misused in modern society that has been saturated with everyday interviewing. Despite the accusation of overuse, an individual's experiences and perceptions are still important objects of research, even though they cannot be considered authentic anymore. (Mills & Birks 2014, Chapter 3; Hyvärinen et al 2017, Chapter 1.)

One-to-One and Focus Group Theme Interviews

A semi-structured interview is sometimes called a theme interview, which means that instead of carefully formulated questions there are wider predefined topics or themes to steer the conversation. A theme interview method emphasises the importance of discussion themes over accurately formalised questions and is an excellent choice in this sort of research for attracting rich information about matters not yet known. The goal of a theme interview is to find out during the discussion new topis and new questions to discuss about. (Hyvärinen et al. 2017, Chapter 6; Ojasalo et al. 2015, 41; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 6.)

I use one-to-one theme interviews to increase understanding about the top and average performing salespeople's unique perceptions of their sales success competencies and behaviours that indicate these competencies in action, and how they learn and develop those competencies in the context of the target company. The two sets of interview data are first analysed separately and then compared to each other to see, if there are differences between these two groups of participants. The analysis and collection of interview data takes place simultaneously and accumulated understanding affects the following interviews deepening the picture of the interview themes. The interviews are analysed through content analysis method that is further explained in the chapter 2.5.

I use theme interviews also in focus groups that aim at engaging carefully selected groups of participants to discuss about predefined themes beneficial for the research goal and research task at hand. In the focus group interviews, the researcher acts as the facilitator of discussion and encourages interaction between the selected participants about the themes. Through focus group interviews, I can gain more multifaceted and multidimensional information about the themes. In a focus group the social interaction happens between the participants and with the facilitator, and this social nature of the focus group is considered an important attribute of this data collection method. The social interaction is affected by the power relations, suspensions, cultural conventions, emotions, and creativity of each group. (King, Horrocks & Brooks 2019, 98-99; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 7.)

The first focus group consisting of only the top management are engaged to discuss about the future strategic sales success competencies, the competencies that they appreciate the most in their top performers, and how these competencies can be seen in practice. The top management is also asked to discuss about the competency development possibilities in the company and about their circumstances, goals and wishes about a competency development framework. This interview is also recorded, transcribed to Word documents, and the relevant expressions are simplified, coded, dismantled and transferred to Excel. The data is meaningfully categorised and unified into clusters of behaviours that indicate a certain competency is action. The focus group interview data is then compared and combined to interview data from one-to-one theme interviews.

The second focus group is called together for the purposes of informant confirmation and member checking, data generation and for reaching a common understanding and agreeance of the success competencies in sales in this case context. The discussion themes are the compiled sales success competencies and behavioural indicators of these competencies in action based on my interpretation of previous interviews, observations, and analysis of documents. The template for the interview is the attachment 4 of this report paper.

For this focus group interview, I invite the top management and the salespeople from the one-to-one interviews. In addition, other salespeople who were not part of interviews are asked to join the focus group to give fresh insight about the matter and to ensure that the people outside the scope of the research activities are able to easily grasp the research results. This group is united through a common task and their ability to bring forth own, even differing points of views is considered important. (Ojasalo et al. 2015, 41-42; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 7.)

3.4.3 Observation

Observation means that a researcher follows and observes events related to the researched phenomenon. Especially in the occasion, where the processes are linked to people, observation can be considered beneficial. When observing social phenomena, the place can be anything between a person’s workstation to intranet discussions. In an organization the processes and practices are often well descripted, but through observation it is possible to confirm how the events take place in their natural environment. This makes observation an excellent way to confirm, reveal disparities and complete information collected through interviews. Observation is at its best when there is a need to collect information about interaction situations and group phenomena. (Kananen 2013, 88-89; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 8.)

Observation data must be systematically collected, and it needs to be decided in advance what information is collected and how does it relate to the research topic. As the objects of observations are clear in this research, I use structured, as opposed to unstructured, observation tools. This means that I collect the observations to an Excel -table that I fill in like a diary, where I collect and write down information under separate headings. The observation data collection and analysis take place simultaneously and the observation data is summarized and analyzed as it accumulates.

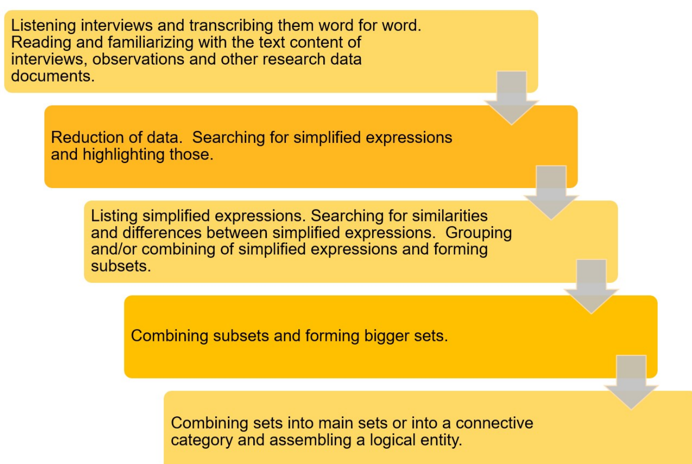
Observation can happen in different forms. Observation in secret without the targeted people knowing they are observed makes the observation data very authentic but causes huge ethical questions. Observation is done without observer participation, when the targeted people know about observation and have consented to it but are not interacting with the observer who stays outside of the events taking place. In a participating observation, the researcher is interacting with the researched people and these social events are important sources of information. In this observation form, the observer can also be seen as the change agent and their presence has strong influence on the observed events. Inclusive or participatory observation form is similar to participating observation but highlights even more observation of aspects of cooperation in data production and the people are encouraged to work together with the researcher. (Kananen 2013, 88; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 3.2.)

Criticism about observation usually concerns the subjectivity of the method as the results are always dependent on the researcher. The researcher also needs to ensure that their actions do not endanger or belittle certain groups in the organization due to reasons that are not included in the research scope. For example, for the purposes of identifying competencies of salespeople, it is a common practice to classify people according to their sales performance, but not based on their gender. The criticism about subjectivity of observation data can be generalized to concern whole qualitative research as the end results reflect the researcher's choices and subjective interpretations. In this case study, I aim at improving the quality of the observation data by taking critical notice of my own presence, actions and questioning my own interpretations on a continuous basis. (Sanghi 2016, 5; Puusa et al. 2020, Chapter 8.)

3.4.4 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method and a loose theoretical framework of qualitative research analysis. As an analysis method content analysis is text analysis like discourse analyses as well, but the object of research is different. The content analysis aims at identifying meanings from text while discourse analysis aims at identifying how meaning is generated in text. In content analysis it is essential to think that the purpose is to research human perceptions of reality instead of ultimate truth. In this development project, it was already clear in the beginning that people's own perceptions would be focused on to create a context and case relevant information. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4., 4.4.1.)

Through the content analysis the researcher aims at organizing the data to compact and clear form without losing any relevant information. Inductive analysis has three phases: 1. Data reduction or simplifying. 2. Clustering or grouping. 3. Abstraction or creation of theoretical concepts. Before analysis, the unit of analysis needs to be defined. Unit of analysis can be a single word, sentence, enunciation, or entire thought. The selected unit is defined by the object of study as well as the nature of the research data. The step by step proceeding process of content analysis can be seen in the picture 11. below. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)



Picture 11. Content analysis process according to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

In the reduction phase of the data, it is essential to prune irrelevant content away and to compress and dismantle the data into simplified expressions for further highlighting purposes. It is recommended to use, for example, different colors for highlighting expressions of different meaning, which are then gathered to lists, which form the bases for clustering expressions. Clustering of reduced expressions means the process of grouping those expressions describing the same phenomenon into groups, subsets that are named in a way that describes the content. It is worthwhile to notice that an enunciation may contain multiple reduced expressions of even different meanings. Clustering is a way of compressing information, and it forms the bases for the basic structure of the research and initial descriptions of researched phenomenon. Clustering is continued further by combining subsets into sets and then into main sets and/or into a connective set that are named according to the phenomenon they describe, which is related to the research problem. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

Clustering of data is part of abstraction process of research data. It comes apparent through the transformation of original expressions into theoretical concepts and conclusions. Thus, the answer to research problem is gained through combining concepts. The conclusion is based on the abstraction process that has formed a description of the problem through concepts. The result of qualitative content analysis is a model, a concept structure, concepts, or descriptive themes born from the empirical research data. The inductive qualitative analysis becomes abductive as the theory is considered guiding the initial observations and clustering process of the results. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

Content analysis is very similar to thematic analysis, but for the purposes of this study, the content analysis is a better option. In comparison to thematic analysis, the content analysis can be abductive and there is a strong prior decision about the topics of interest, which are both important aspects for the focus of this research. Also, in the thematical analysis, the themes are gathered into thematical mind maps of relational concepts while in the content analysis, the data is clustered into subsets, sets and main sets to describe their relations. For the clarity and usability purposes of this research, the data clustering that takes place in the table format is more suitable. Content analysis also enables the use of quantifying analysis methods to support the results, while in the thematical analysis this would be impossible. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

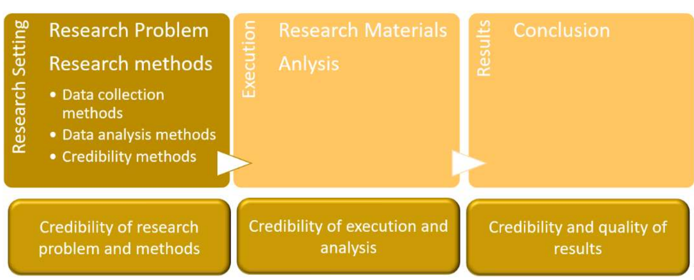
As a conclusion, content analysis suits especially well this case study research, where the research topic was well defined and known, and the analysis approach was considered abductive as prior research and theoretical suggestions had been considered in advance. The clustering process characteristic to content analysis and its format also suited especially well the target company’s practices as the clustering tables could be further used as the basis of self-assessment survey of the employees and they met the software requirements. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

Content analysis is sometimes criticized for only focusing and analyzing obvious meanings found from the data while thematical analysis is better in revealing hidden and deeper meanings. On the other hand, the depth of analysis is decided by me, the researcher already in the beginning of the analysis process and both the content and thematical analysis will bring equally superficial or in-depth results depending on the researcher's disposition in any case. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, Chapter 4.4.3.)

3.4.5 Reliability and Validity Methods

A research's credibility and quality are evaluated through the concepts of research reliability and validity. The reliability refers to the stability of the research results and validity refers to researching the right things. Both the reliability and validity of the research need to be considered before the research process takes place. The purpose is to guarantee that the research is based on reliable and credible data. (Kananen 2019, 30.)

The validity of the research starts from the correct definition of the research problem, which leads the researcher to research right things as seen in research credibility review in picture 12. below. The gathered data need to be authentic, and the amount of research materials need to suffice to make right interpretations and conclusions. To guarantee the reliability of the research the research stages need to be described in a way that if the research is repeated the same research results apply. (Kananen 2019, 31.)



Picture 12. Credibility review of research phases (Kananen 2019, 31).

Saturation can be aspired through reaching the saturation point in number of interviews, where new interviews do not offer new information anymore. Other way to use saturation is the saturation of materials through triangulation, which means collecting data from different sources and, for example, comparing the data to own interpretation of the matter, or to study if the different information sources produce mutually supporting results. Confirming informants refers to the occasion where the informants like the interviewees confirm their previous sayings and interpretation. Member checking refers to the verification of the interpretation, where another party verifies the analysis and interpretation of the materials. Referring to outside sources like relevant literature and research, and the internal logic of the particular research, where the results are correctly deduced from the materials both play role in increasing the level of research credibility. (Kananen 2019, 31-33; Woodside 2017, 6.)

Credibility review is always based on the sufficient documentation, which enables the tracking of decisions, selected solutions and evaluating them. The credibility of a qualitative research is still often an estimate as it cannot be calculated and evaluated in a direct and straightforward way as it is for example in quantitative research. (Kananen 2019, 36.)

For the purposes of triangulation both secondary and primary sources of data will be collected, and data will be gathered through observation, surveys and different interviews of management and salespeople. For the member checking purposes this research work is guided by a selected and recognised thesis counsellor. Similar member checking support will be provided by the COO of the target company, whose previous experience in competency development can be considered valuable for the project. Informants that in this research are considered the management and salespeople will have the opportunity of confirming their sayings from the interviews and interpretation of the data through focus group interviews. Also, the summary of analysis of interviews is delivered to all the interviewed people and their agreeance with the document is asked.

In this research, I will use current and relevant academic literature and previous research as outside referrals for this project and aim at logically conducting this research through its different phases. All the proceedings of the research will be documented and systematically reviewed in meetings with the thesis counsellor and the target company's management.

3.5 Research Ethics

In any research it is important to be aware of the ethical aspects involved especially in research involving human participants. In this chapter, I present some ethical issues considered in this research that are characteristic to case study research.

There is always the basic ethical dilemma that is associated with drawing interpretations of narratives outside of their temporal and social contexts. This challenge cannot be avoided in case study research, but the researcher can diminish the concerns and aspire objectivity, transparency, and quality in all the stages of research. (SAGE Research Methods 2017.)

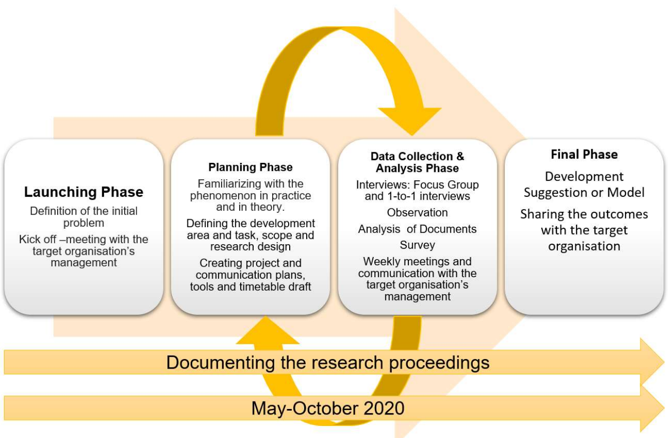
Another area of concern is about anonymity and consent of participants. In a case study the researcher often works closely with participants and gathers a great deal of highly detailed and even personal information on the research participants. There is a risk of inadvertently exposing confidential information or the participants' identities without their permission unless preventive measures are taken, which is especially important with vulnerable population segments like with different minorities. In this research the names of the participants are removed already in the analysis phase and only the information strictly related to the research topic is involved. The interpretation of research results is also based on the simplified, dismantled, and synthesized research data from multiple sources, which makes it impossible to link with a specific participant. The research data is also gathered and used only for the research purposes that the participants agree on, and the participation happen in safe environments only. These actions aim at ensuring that there is no physical nor psychological harm caused to research participants. (Arene 2020; SAGE Research Methods 2017.)

The independency of the research and researcher causes also ethical concerns. This case study does not hold any hidden agenda and I, as the researcher, am an outsider that is not involved in the company politics, which should diminish the possibility of conflicts of interest or partiality. (Arene 2020.)

It is also important that the researcher does not discriminate any population segments based on attributes that are not relevant with the scope of research. For example, the participants should not be selected or treated differently based on their sex or ethnicity unless those are considered important factors in the research. In this case study, the participants are selected based on their roles in the management and in sales, and the level of sales performance, but no other criteria is used. One of the significant features in research is that all the participants are treated with respect. (SAGE Research Methods 2017.)

4 Project plan and Project Phases

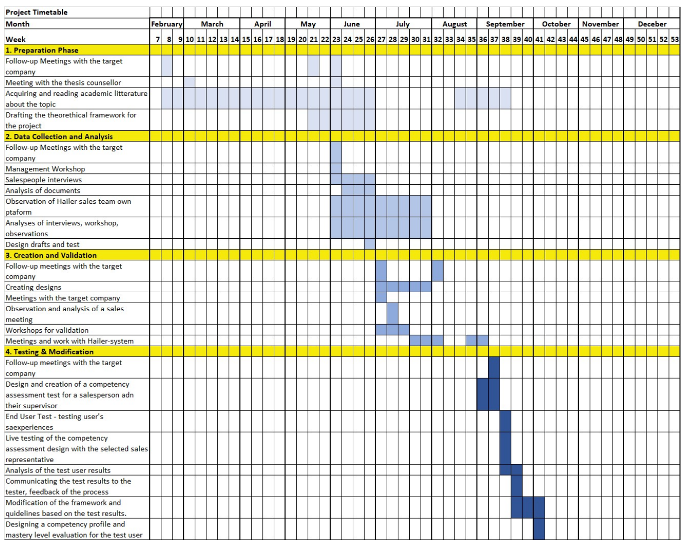
In this chapter I describe the project plan of this development work. In the following sub-chapters I describe what happened in each phase. The project plan of this case study is divided into four main phases as seen in the picture 13. These phases follow the iterative case study process by Ojasalo et al. (2015, 53). It was also agreed that the target organisation can have immediate access to any research outcomes that emerge during the project.



Picture 13. The main research phases based on the case study process by Ojasalo et al. (2015, 53).

The first project phase, the "Launching Phase". This phase contains the initial problem recognition and definition together with the target organisation's COO and a Kick off -meeting with the rest of the management team of the target company. The next phase is the "Planning Phase" including the familiarising with the phenomenon through practice and theory, and then further defining the development area and tasks, and the research design of the project. This second phase is an iterative phase together with the third phase "Data Collection & Analysis Phase" that includes data collection and analysis activities like the focus group and 1-to-1 interviews, surveys, observations, and analysis of documents. The fourth phase the "Final Phase" includes the assembly of the development proposal to match the development and the activities for sharing it with the target organisation. These phases cover the time span from the start of May to the end of October 2020.

The documentation of the development project follows the different project phases and the main project phases, and their tasks are also dismantled and scheduled to a project management spreadsheet for communication and weekly follow-ups with the target company. A rough timetable follows and records the weekly proceedings of the development project as seen in the picture 14. The interviews and meetings were also scheduled to personal Teams - calendars of the participants.



Picture 14. Project phases and tasks in a weekly project management Excel used for follow-up and communication purposes.

The project proceedings of each phase are followed during the following chapters from 4.1 – 4.4.

4.1 Launching Phase

The initial idea for researching development of competencies and continuous learning possibilities of salespeople came up in February 2020 after sparring with the target organisation's COO. The thought of building a learning organisation in the context of a sales unit was something that the target organisation wanted to investigate as they had just committed to the RBV of strategy as an approach to transform their business. At this stage, the initial project plan was created in a kick off -meeting with the management.

Due to Covid-19 outbreak in the spring 2020, the project was postponed in part. Later the connection with the target company was re-established. The objective of the development work was renegotiated, and it broadened from the initial problem definition. The organisation's management wanted to especially investigate the competency-based learning and development processes that could be scalable to whole of the company or at least to all of its strategic units. It was also decided that the initial sales unit focus would stay in place and serve as a pilot project to produce development suggestions that could be later scaled to other critical units.

4.2 Planning Phase

At this stage, the initial a project plan and schedule, were updated and the roles of the people involved, and communication methods of the project were agreed on. I conducted the planning phase together with the target company's management and my thesis councillor. It became obvious that the international locations of the targeted people and Covid-19 related restrictions would affect this development project. It was clear that the data collection activities would need to take place mostly through digital channels, which was considered already in the project planning phase.

The research problem, questions and objectives were defined to assist in the collection of relevant methodological and theoretical literature. The decisions made in this phase led me to gather literature and prior research about RBV of strategy, learning organisations, learning and development in organisations, competency frameworks and sales competencies. I started to familiarize myself with the relevant literature in forms of books, e-books and e-articles and analysed the content. I drafted the theoretical framework for the research starting from the literature review simultaneously with the research designs. I used some of the materials recommended by my instructors in Haaga-Helia and sparred with my peer students about the theory. There are several literary sources in this line of study and my thesis counsellor's coaching supported me through this study phase.

In this phase, I integrated all the aspects of case study strategy approach presented in the chapter 3 to the planning of the project. I tried to take as many aspects as possible into account. I had a lot of discussions with the COO of the target company to ensure that we were both in agreeance with the definition of the development area, its scope and expected outcomes of the project.

I also sparred and introduced all the research methods and reasoning behind them, to the top management of the target company to have the opportunity to produce multifaceted data from the perspective of the targeted people through various methods. We concluded that the basic process for competency framework building mentioned in the chapter 2.4 would be suitable for the development project and decided on semi-structured interviews and observations as methods for gathering perceptions on sales competencies and learning and development as it was recommended in the literature review in chapters 2.3 and 2.4. I and the top management decided to aim at the role specific situationalist competency profiles, mentioned in the chapter 2.4 and wanted to engage the salespeople to the process as early as possible to avoid the risks of creating too general analysis as warned in the chapter 2.4. and, to commit the salespeople to learning of the new competencies as mentioned in the chapter 2.2 and 2.3.

In this research, the validity and reliability were considered already in the planning phase of the development project. Interview saturation, triangulation, informant confirmation, member checking of interpretations, referrals to outside sources and internal logic of the research were all presented to the top management as actions that would play part in the project proceedings. It was also important that we discussed about research ethics, when selecting the targeted people so not to discriminate anyone. We also agreed that no names would be used, and the results would be only discussed on a unit level to maintain anonymity of the participants.

Research plan included the initial selection of the targeted people, the salespeople, and the top management, who formed the unit of analysis for this study. They were the target company's top management includes the CEO/CFO, CIO, and COO, who all actively participated the research. The COO was selected as my primary contact person. Together with him, I established a communication system consisting weekly face-to-face meetings and steady information sharing processes taking place primarily in the company's own communication platform. A separate communication forum to share research findings and outcomes was established with the whole management team.

In the planning phase, it was decided together with the top management that the whole sales unit of 11 people would be observed as part of this project. Initially four salespeople were picked for the survey and interviewing purposes. It was also agreed with the management, that after the first round of interviews, there would be still an opportunity to invite four more interviewees, if needed for the purposes of saturation of interview data. The interviewees were selected based on their performance, seniority, and availability at the estimated time of the project.

For the purposes of this project, excellent sales performance was determined based on multiple criteria. Criteria included salespeople's performance in amount of deals, size of deals, profit margins of deals, the negotiated role of the organisation in complex deals, where there are multiple service providers, amount of strategic deals (selling new services) and similar results from agent networks managed by the salesperson. The salespeople's performances were also evaluated by managerial assessment including perceptions of employees' organisational citizenship skills that described the amount of burden that a salesperson placed on the rest of the organisation. For example, if the salesperson used internal resources according to processes without hassles or if they acted cooperatively and civilly with other people internally and externally. More value was still placed on numerical performance measures.

During the planning phase, I drafted the first interview themes that were in line with the research questions and objectives. I also used the theory concerning the competency frameworks and sales competencies from the chapters 2.4 and 2.5 in formulating the themes for the semi-structured interviews. I decided to share the themes beforehand with the interviewees to orientate them to the topic at hand, which was a practice some researchers favoured mentioned in chapter 3.4.2. The themes can be seen as attachments 2. and 3. One of the templates was directed to the salespeople and the other for the top management. In the invitation, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants, and how the data is handled after the interview. It was also highlighted that the participation is voluntary.

All and all, it can be said that the planning phase extended in total from May 2020 to the end of August 2020. The planning phase and the data collection and analysis phase proved to be overlapping and iterative as it often is with case study research strategy process. This phase included two planning meetings with the top management, one meeting with the thesis councillor, numerous emails and discussions, and collection and analysis of secondary methodological and theoretical literature. During the planning phase, the development area, the targeted people, the research design including the research problem, research questions, research objectives, research methods were all studied and the foundation for the research was laid. Also, the ethical aspects of the research were considered and formulated on paper. In the planning phase, I also created my own research diary files for research notes and made the initial drafts of observation diary templates to Excel and theme-interview templates to Word -documents.

4.3 Data Collection & Analysis Phase

The collection of the primary data for this case study research started in the end of May 2020. The development project was introduced to the employees of the target organisation. The goals and research methods of the project were presented carefully to the salespeople, whose involvement was crucial. The introductions took place in the group level sales meetings and communication channels. All the salespeople gave their consent for being observed and to assist with the research.

The first interview in the data collection phase was the focus group theme interview with the CEO/CFO, CIO, and COO, of the target company on the 29^{th} of May in 2020. The themes were the strategic goals of the organisation, what sales competencies could be inferred from the strategic goals, what sales success competencies they recognised from their best performers and what behaviour supported those competencies and the learning and development in the organisation (see attachment 2 for interview template). These themes were designed to support in generating relevant information about the area of development and to identify current and future oriented strategic sales competencies and behaviours from the managerial point of view.

This discussion took place at the headquarters of the target organisation, in a negotiation room and lasted about two hours. The management sparred and discussed actively and openly about the themes. The management had a clear consensus that development of HRC was one of the most urgent management issues for the transformation of the organisation which led naturally to discussion on the competencies of successful salespeople in the organisation. They also first-hand stated that they were not a learning organisation and did not have almost any processes of learning and development in place in the organisation outside of annual development discussion that were not really followed through.

The interview was recorded and immediately transcribed to a word document. When the text version of the interview was complete, I started immediately to analyse it according to the content analysis process presented in the chapter 3.4.4. I reduced the content into simplified expressions and translated them from Finnish to English, when needed. Then I organised the expressions into subsets based on the meaning of the expression in an Excel as seen in picture 15. I also removed all the names from the text for protecting the anonymity of the participants.

Original Expression	Simplified Expressions
"Niin kuin XXXXXX. Se hakee proaktiivisesti tilanteita uusien palveluiden myymiselle. Sellaista, joka pystyy menemään uuteen paikkaan, ilman mitään aiempia keissejä ja rohkeasti vaan avaamaan keskustelun uudesta busineksestä. Eikä myy mitään vanhaa ratkaisua vaan samantien aloittaa tarjoamalla palvelukokonaisuutta tyhjästä. Niin kuin pioneerihenkeä."	Proactively looks for opportunities for selling services. Bravely opening conversations in new markets. Offering new service packages. Not leaning on previous business cases./Creates the new busines cases. Shows pioneering spirit.
"...tekee oman business planin joka vuosi vaikkei sitä pyydetä ja sanoo haluavansa olla oman tekemisensä toimitusjohtaja. On semmoista itsenäisyyttä ja omistajuutta omasta tekemisestä ja tavoitteista. Ymmärtää tosi hyvin oman vastuunsa busineksessä."	Entrepreneurial attitude. Continuing ownership of own work and goals. Making own business plans. Willingness to being the CEO of own actions. Understanding own accountability in business
"Onhan se niin että deal structure käy vaikeammaksi. Consultative selling, ja asiakkaan tuntemus nousee."	Managing complex deal structures. Consultative selling. Customer understanding./Customer orientation.
"...että ne, jotka lukee vaikka sitten niitä alan lehtiä tai muuta, pystyy näkemään asiakkaan pintaa syvemmälle ja niiden business ja	Keeping track of the news in the sector./Collecting business intelligence. Knowing customers in depth

Picture 16. Example of reduction and the simplification of the original expressions.

I continued the analysis according to the content analysis process by clustering simplified expressions to subsets as seen in picture x below. The clusters were e.g., “Selling Services”, “New Business”, “Process Skills” etc. when I decided on a common nominator amongst a group of simplified expressions that made it easy to categorize the findings as seen in picture 17.

ubset	Simplified Expressions
Selling services	Courage to offer new service packages to old customers.
	Offering new service packages.
	Selling new solutions.
	Selling services.
New Business	Bravely opening conversations in new markets.
	Courage to create new business even when there has not been any previous business ca
	Creating credible leads for new business.
	Creating networks for enabling new business.
	Not leaning on previous business cases./Creates the new business cases.
	Proactively looks for opportunities for selling services.
	Selling new solutions to new markets.
	Shows pioneering spirit.
Process skills	Creating credible leads for new business.
	Managing complex deal structures.
	Understanding basic finance.
Sales approaches	Consultative selling.
	Partnership sales.
	Team selling in complex deals
	Value creation with customer.
Communication skills	Argumentation and convincing.
	Communication skills internally
	Communications skills externally
	Negotiation in services business.
	Sharing information
Customer Orientation	Customer understanding./Customer orientation.
	Knowing own customers and anticipating needs.
	Value co-creation with customers
Independance	Continuing ownership of own work and goals.
	Entrepreneurial attitude.
	Getting things done on their own.
	Pioneering spirit.
	Taking proactive charge of own territory, but also sharing information outside of it.
	Understanding own accountability in business

Picture 17. Example of clustering simplified expressions to subsets.

I made the first draft of sets from subsets that could be recognized from the reduced expressions. During the analysis, I reflected research materials from the point of view of research problem and theoretical framework. I compared the sets with possible previous research about strategic sales competencies and about organisational learning and development practices. The purpose of comparison was to see, if the analysis showed similarities or differences with the results from prior research and supported my decision in set creation.

After the focus group interview, I started to collect data through observation. In this research case, I was an outside observer without strong observer participation, but my role as an observer and interviewer was made apparent to all the participants. It can of course still be the case that my sheer presence influenced the events that I observed, but I aimed at minimizing my impact and giving space for the natural and uncontrolled interaction amongst the salespeople.

I observed the salespeople in their daily communication and interaction about their work and tasks in their digital communication channels and in weekly G-Meet sales meetings, where almost all the team level communication took place. I observed and analyzed the salespeople’s activities in the organization’s digital communication platform in the general feed section, where all the salespeople’s received orders and actualized project results were automatically posted. This reporting automation created the circumstances, where the salespeople were very visibly present in the company’s general communication, making them also active members of the digital work community as they routinely discussed about the deals in this digital environment. I also observed and analyzed salespeople’s activities in their own Sales Team - channel, which is the forum to converse about and share purely sales related topics. An example how posts look like in this channel can be seen in the picture 18. below.

Picture 18. Examples of the view to the Sales Team -channel from June 2020

My observation period covered three months starting from the beginning of June and ending in the end of August. In the Sales Team -channel, I observed and analyzed altogether

132 posts. 60 posts from June, 35 posts from July and 37 posts from August. Altogether these posts covered 35 different conversations. From the general feed, I similarly observed and analyzed only salespeople's activities and posts that totaled to 157 posts covering 95 different conversations from June to August. There was 68 posts form June, 53 posts from July and 36 posts from August.

I used structured observation tools to keep on track of my observations as recommended in the chapter 3.4.3. When writing about and analyzing the observation data in my own observation Excel, I first took care of the anonymity of the participants according to the needs of research ethics mentioned in the chapter 3.4.5 and deleted the names of the posting salespeople and referred to them as “Person1”, “Person2”, “Person3” and so on. I numbered the persons based on the order of their appearance in the conversation and wrote my observations and interpretations about conversations next to individual comments. I observed, color coded and analyzed conversations according to content analysis method I used with the focus group interview described in the chapter 3.4.4. mostly on a daily basis throughout the three months' observation period. I wrote down the topic of conversations and what sales role related behaviors, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and contacts could be recognized from conversations. I also observed how knowledge sharing and peer support and learning took place in this social channel that was the main channel of collaboration in the target company at the time. I continued analyzing my observations with content analysis techniques and simplified and dismantled my observations into simplified expressions making them into subsets in the content analysis Excel that I had already created.

One post or parts of posts in the general and sales team - discussion channels could be categorized for several subset categories. For example, a salesperson posted in June 2020 a long response to a conversation about processing leads in the sales team channel. Their post aimed at developing internal processes and in the posts the salesperson weighted different benefits of optional lead management process practices and shared their own experiences in order to argue on behalf of their preferred method. The behavior observed through these posts was categorized to subsets of “Collaboration”, “Developing tools”, “Influencing others” and “Problem solving” as he was consciously participating in co-creating a solution to a real practical problem and showed persistency as they kept on insisting about the importance of accurate solution. The observation data were based on my own interpretation of topics and on observable online behaviors of the channel members, but in addition my interpretations were sparred on a weekly basis with the COO of the company.

In June the 6th, I started conversations with the HSQ manager of the target company, who was simultaneously building HR related functionalities to internal systems and defining the future work descriptions of the salespeople. With the collaboration of the HSQ manager and the COO, I was able to study all the written documents related to the role of the sales-people. The analysis of target company's documents was also done according to content analysis practices in excel using sets and subsets. Due to the nature of the documents, which varied from confidential strategy and project documents and development discussion formulas to more public documents like open vacancy -announcements like seen in the picture 19, I found that the content was already reduced to very simplified form. The simplified expressions were already in English and were relatively straightforward and easily added to the content analysis Excel already containing the data from the focus group interview and data from observation.

Regional Manager, Sales

Deadline: 28.02.2020

Position description

[redacted]

We are looking for a Regional Manager, Sales for the South Europe and Mediterranean region.

As Regional Manager, you will lead sales operations within the region and drive business growth.
You will be responsible for one of 10 regions globally and be part of a global team of regional managers.

The location for this position is open, but preferably in a country within the region. You will report to the COO, located in Finland.

Responsibilities
Your goal is to lead sales operations in the region and you will be responsible for:
- Order intake within the region.
- Organizing sales activities in a proactive manner to achieve set targets
- Sales strategies and securing competitiveness of offers
- Tailoring value propositions to specific opportunities
- Having direct involvement in sales activities, and closing deals
- Developing the sales channels in the respective countries
- Setting performance targets of sales managers and agents in region
- Country strategies to develop business based on company strategy
- Ensuring company practices and procedures are implemented and followed in the region
- Represent Voice of Customers in selected internal development initiatives
- Participating in continuous improvement of sales processes and tool

Requirements
As an ideal candidate you would have:
- BSc, MSc or equivalent degree
- Broad business perspective with at least 5 years' experience of the industry, preferably in a sales capacity or project delivery capacity
- Experience with sales and contract documentation
- Demonstrated drive with excellent collaboration skills
- Ability to influence as well as strong networking skills
- Creative thinking, problem solving and decision making abilities
- Good analytical, presentation and negotiation skills
- Goal orientation and persistence
- open minded for learning new skills, right attitude for our global sales team.
- Fluent spoken and written English
- Willingness and ability to travel, estimated up to 40%

Picture 19. Example of an open vacancy -announcement in 2020 for a sales position included to the content analysis.

At this stage, I started to use colours to differentiate the different sources of information in the content analysis excel as I started to accumulate and compile data from multiple different sources – interviews, observations, and analysis of documents - as seen in the picture 20. Based on the theory, in chapters 2.4 and 2.5, situationalist sales competencies that appear in competency frameworks are recommended to be based primarily on interview data. Through colour coding the source of the data in the analysis of data, I wanted to keep the possibility to place more weight on the data from the interviews in order to avoid its dilution to data from other sources.

Subset	Simplified Expressions
Collaboration	Understands how different parties within and outside the company affect the projects.
	Efficient and goal oriented collaboration to reach the deals.
	Knows when there's better results gained through collaboration than doing alone.
	Team player spirit and ability to lead team based sales.
	Demonstrated drive with excellent collaboration skills
	Right attitude for global sales team
	Initiates collaborative endeavours within own team and other funtions.
	Shares opinions and engages to discussions about common matters.
	Volunteers when support is needed. Offers help.
	Shares proactively own expertise and special skills in the team.
	Expresses willingness to be part of projects and collaboration with other departments

Picture 20. Example color coded data subset covering simplified expressions from the focus group interview, analysis of documents and from observation.

I sent the survey and held one-to-one theme interviews with the salespeople between the 5th -24th of June 2020. During the planning phase, I had discovered and studied about Garvin et al.'s (2008) "Is Yours's a Learning Organisation" - survey and introduced it to the top management of the target organisation in the end of May. After the top management tested the survey for themselves and commitment to the survey and its analysis purposes, I send it to the selected salespeople. The purpose and advantage of the survey was to gather insight about the strengths and weaknesses of current situation in the sales unit, which was important for analysing the starting point for development of internal resource configuration according to the RBV of strategy presented in chapters 2.1 and 2.2.

Each participant filled in the survey on their own except for one salesperson, who needed support in translating the survey options from English to Finnish. In this case, I decided to act as a translator and with the salesperson's consent, I was present during the time he filled in the survey. The survey participants delivered the survey scorecards to me before their one-to-one theme interviews and the survey results were discussed as part of the interviews. In addition, I analysed these survey results through calculated averages in different question categories and used colour coding to make the results of different quartiles visually impactful as seen in picture X. below. In my analysis, the colour red indicates scores representing the bottom quartile (25%), yellow signifies the results that fall under the second lowest quartile (25%), the results in the second highest quartile (25%) are light green and the results in the top quartile (25%) are marked with the dark green colour.

One interviewed salesperson was located in Finland, and we were able to meet face-to-face even in the special circumstances of social distancing due to Covid-19. The other interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams -meeting application, and in case of the salesperson located in mainland China, partly through phone due to the poor internet connection.

I invited the two top-performing salespeople and two average performers, who were all available and volunteering to interviews as agreed with the top management in the planning phase. The purpose and the themes of the interviews were sent beforehand as seen in the attachment 2. The interviews took from approximately 1 to 2 hours and were all recorded to give me, as a researcher, an opportunity to focus on listening, observing, commenting, and steering the discussion. This practice was very much recommended based on the research method literature in the chapter 3.4.2 The interviews were transcribed and dismantled, and the expression were simplified for the content analysis purposes already described in the chapter 3.4.4.

At this stage, before compiling one-to-one interview data to the content analysis Excel, I compared the reduced expressions from interviews of the top performers and average performers to see differences and similarities as it was recommended in the theory in the chapter 2.5 of sales competencies to recognize a superior set of competencies. The data from all the four interviews were strikingly similar and there were not any large differences that could be seen between the data from the top performers in comparison to average performers except for some individual behaviours that were not enough to draw any all explaining conclusions. For example, one top performer had mentioned that they consciously practice learning cycle as part of their everyday tasks. None other mentioned anything about practicing such method as part of their routines in successful projects, but everybody mentioned that they made systematic efforts to learn something new as part of their work.

Another subtle difference was that the average performers spent more interview time and had more simplified expressions linked with the subset of relationship management in comparison to top performers. Both groups of performers still agreed that relationship management was a crucial aspect of success that would play even a more important role in the future as services sales would increase. The top performers had in contrast dwelled more in matters about persistently reaching goals, but once again, goal and achievement orientation was recognised important by both groups of performers.

At this stage, I used the visual online collaboration workspace MURAL to visualise the combined simplified expressions and subsets of the salespeople interview data as seen in the picture 21. below. I shared the MURAL document with the interviewees and management of the company to receive informant confirmation and feedback from my interpretation of the interview data and made some additions. After discussing the results with the COO of the company, I decided to combine the research data from both the top- and average performers as we concluded, that as it was also suggested in previous research in the literature review in the chapter 3.4, it is not credible or necessarily purposeful in this context to point out uncertain differences between the competencies of average and more successful salespeople.

Picture 21. Combined interview data in simplified expression and subsets visualised through MURAL for feedback.

To see if the geographical location of the salespeople would bring any additional insight to research data, I extended the survey and interview invitations to two more salespeople. One was responsible of Chinese and the other of Middle Eastern region. The interview content was once again reduced to simplified expressions and compared to previously combined interview data. There were no new findings that could be related to the research topic and based on these results, I determined that the saturation point of interviews was reached at this stage. The simplified expressions from these two interviews were combined with the other research data in the content analysis Excel and colour coded with blue colour as seen in the picture 22. below.

Subset	Simplified Expressions
Goal orientation	Knows what to aim at and hates losing. Possesses personal accountability.
	Makes own business plans with dedication.
	Understands how to make services a priority objetive for growth.
	Strong tendency for achievement and goal orientation.
	Proactive drive to achieve set targets.
	Sets performance target for sales managers and agents
	Goal orientation and persistence
	Sharing and asking systematically resources based on business objectives
	Celebrates successes and reached goals.
	Describes steps on how to reach own business goals.
	Sets long- and short-term goals and persists to reach them.
	Makes customer specific short- and long-term plans.
	Prioritises and organizes tasks and works well with deadlines.
	Sets loose plans and outlines to weekly work, but also adapts rapidly according to changing situations.
	Shows competitiveness and strives to do well and aims at self-improvement.
	Grabs opportunities to sell and is fearless enough to close the deal.
	Talks actively about results, goals, and next steps on how to reach them.
	Goes actively after the more challenging and ambitious contracts that aim for longevity.
	Goes the extra mile for enabling long term goals.
	Presents hunter-mentality in searching target companies and making efforts to reach the right decision makers.
	Can be aggressive and pushy to reach results.

Picture 22. Example of a subset covering simplified expressions from focus group interview, analysis of documents and from observation of communication channels.

From the content analysis, it became obvious that the interview data carried a lot of data and expressions describing sales competencies that could be seen as situationalist behaviours and behavioural repertoires of successful salespeople as mentioned in the chapter 2.1. The results carried most information value related to the topic of research and enforced my assumption that the interviews would be the primary source of information as it was also referred to in the theory in chapter 2.4. For the purposes of the second focus group interview, I decided to combine all the similar simplified expressions giving priority to the form of expressions and terms found from the interview data, which should keep the content familiar and easily recognizable to the targeted people as explained in the chapter 3.4. instead of alienating people from the competency profiles.

At this stage, I clustered and compiled the competency subsets into 11 clearly recognizable data sets. The data sets listed simplified expressions that described behaviours that serve as concrete and observable contextual indicators of each set or competency in practice, which was the format of competency profiles referred to in chapter 2.4. and mentioned in the chapter 2.1. about RBV of strategy. Together these sets of data formed the main data set that comprised all the sets and formed the basis of the strategic sales competency profile of the target company.

In the content analysis, I used the salespeople's own expressions as much as possible to keep the outcome recognizable and to create custom-made content for the target company. At the same time, I made a word document explaining my research data analysis and showing my interpretation of research data in sets of simplified expression that was made available for all the salespeople and management in the target organisation's communication channels for informant confirmation and member checking of interpretations from participants and for feedback from the targeted people in general. In addition, a second focus group interview was called together for informant confirmation, member checking interpretations and conclusions, and for reaching collective consensus purposes.

I held the second focus group interview in three-part in July 2020. The interview invitation was given in free format during a weekly sales meeting and the purpose was to gather a number of management and salespeople together to discuss, scrutinize, and weigh the data sets of competencies that would be the bases of sales competency profile for the purposes of developing competency-based learning and development practices for the benefit of organisational learning.

The focus group was attended by the COO, CEO and CIO and four salespeople. Two of the participating salespeople had participated in 1-to-1 interviews. All the focus group members had a week's worth of time to familiarize themselves with the analysed research materials and my interpretation of them before the discussion took place. I kept the datasets visible throughout the whole discussion for all the members to see and steered the conversation from dataset to dataset. The aim of the focus group interview was to have a conversation about each data set that were named as sales competencies, and of simplified expressions linked to that competency that described behaviours indicating the competency in question in practice. The focus group was to discuss and form a shared consensus about the content and importance of each competency in relation to company strategy and everyday sales performance.

In the group we were able to scrutinize, argue, modify, and agree upon the common criteria between the management and salespeople on my interpretation of the research data and the description of sales success competencies that would best drive sales performance. As the task at hand, held significant meaning for the whole focus group, it was approached with the gravity and active participation by all parties and promoted the important aspects of people's commitment to competency framework and learning of competencies that were highlighted in the chapters 2.3. and 2.4.

As these focus group interviews in three -part took place through Microsoft Teams and G-meet online communication tools due to the diverse global locations of all the participants, my facilitator's possibilities to affect the circumstances of the group discussion were limited to holding welcoming all -speeches, introductions to the task at hand and to steering the discussion. I also acted as the scribe during the meetings and took notes and made simultaneous modifications to the document at hand for all the participants to see. As the facilitator of the discussion, I aimed at encouraging the participants with "what, how and please tell" – suggestions to engage all the participants and to steer the direction of the discussion as suggested in chapter 3.4.2. The focus group interview succeeded very well in its task and proved that there is huge creative potentiality in co-creative focus groups, which can be an asset in bringing forth ideas and enforcing shared visions.

After the second focus group interview, I was able to design the draft for the sales competency framework based on the datasets and their weighted importance of certain competencies discussed in the focus group interview. At the same time, the agreed observation period ended in the end of August, and I finalised the content analysis of primary data. These data collection activities were spread between the June, July, and August 2020. These months were very intensive in terms of communication, meetings and co-operation with the target company and contained plenty individual information management work from my part.

To gain more insight and member checking assistance for my final interpretation, I invited the top performing salesperson to an additional 1-to-1 interview about the possible competency assessment process. As part of the interview, the salesperson filled in their own competency assessment draft. The idea was that as the top performing salesperson, they should reach a high level of mastery from most of the competency sets and recognise themselves from the sales competency profile. The interview took place in September 2020.

4.3.1 Research results

In this chapter, I present and discuss the research results that became apparent at this stage. The purpose of this research was to gain in depth situational understanding about the salespeople's important sales competencies that drive high levels of sales performance, how these competencies are learned and developed in the first place, and how to develop competency-based learning and development processes in the target company in the future according to the principles of RBV of Business.

The outcomes of the data collection and analysis phase can be divided into three parts. There are the research results about **1.)** Sales competencies, **2.)** Learning and development of sales competencies in the target company and **3.)** Possibilities of developing the learning and development of sales competencies.

1.) Sales competencies

Based on the research, the sales competencies linked with excellent sales performance in the target company in global environmental technology and services field were **1.)** Commercial and strategic thinking, **2.)** Collaboration skills, **3.)** Communication and influencing skills, **4.)** Customer orientation and customer intelligence, **5.)** Goal and action orientation, **6.)** Adaptability, **7.)** Relationship management and skills in building networks, **8.)** Knowledge about offerings and technical understanding, **9.)** Continuous learning, **10.)** Mastering tools and **11.)** Entrepreneurial attitude and self-efficacy. These results were reached through qualitative research methods and are not placed to an order of importance.

The sales competencies of the researched sales unit can be also viewed through the categorization by Verbeke et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis that helps the comparison of these competencies to prior research results as seen in table 1. below.

Table 1. Research results about sales competencies that drive sales performance according to categorisation by Verbeke et al. (2011, 409-410).

Skill levels
"Learned proficiency at performing necessary tasks for the sales job." (Verbeke et al. 2011, 408.)

Interpersonal:	collaboration skills
	communication and influencing skills
	relationship management and skills in building networks
Selling related knowledge:	
	commercial and strategic thinking

knowledge about offerings and technical understanding
mastering tools
customer orientation and customer intelligence

Degree of adaptiveness:

adaptability
continuous learning capabilities

Motivation

"The amount of effort a salesperson desires to expend on each activity or task associated with the job." (Verbeke et al. 2011, 408.)

Goal Orientation:

goal and action orientation

Work Engagement:

entrepreneurial attitude and self-efficacy

From the competency categories especially "Commercial and strategic thinking", "Knowledge about offerings and technical understanding", "Mastering tools" and "Customer orientation and customer intelligence" which refer to selling related knowledge were very pronounced in research results, which is in accordance with Verbeke et al.'s (2011, 422) meta-analysis. Based on the meta-analysis the salespeople both in services and product sales are knowledge brokers in this sense, which refers to the importance of salespeople's knowledge and level of understanding about their offerings and about their customers to be efficient and smart in the sales process with customers, in practicing value-based selling and in co-creating solutions. All these knowledge related aspects have grown in importance in knowledge-intensive economies as presented in chapter 2.5.

The second most pronounced category in this research covered interpersonal skills like "Collaboration skills", "Communication and influencing skills" and Relationship management and skills in building networks". The categories covering interpersonal skills were considered side by side as important as selling related knowledge categories. Still, there cannot be direct comparison between the importance of different sales drivers between these as the measurement methods, research contexts and sale types all influence the causal relation between a determinant and salesperson's performance.

Verbeke et al. (2011, 423) raised a degree of adaptiveness and this way adaptive selling as an important independent driver of sales performance that's importance stayed high almost in all different sales conditions. This competency was also supported by my research findings in this case-study research through "Adaptability" and "Continuous learning capabilities". Verbeke et al. (2011, 423) also point out that high level of adaptiveness might be in sync with cognitive aptitude like IQ, but that was not researched or indicated in this research. In this research the competencies were seen to be apparent as behavioural repertoires and not as e.g., IQ test results.

The research results also supported prior research results presented by the Verbeke et al.'s (2011, 423) meta-analysis that argued on behalf of work engagement, which came apparent in the competency category of "Entrepreneurial attitude and self-efficacy" as a strong sales driver. And finally, the results also supported the category of goal orientation as in "Goal and action orientation" as a sales competency.

These results were gained through the research methods that focused on positive sales competencies, which means that there were no direct results of negative sales drivers like ambiguous role perceptions. There were also no clear results indicating salespeople's native traits or so-called aptitudes as sales drivers. There were mentions about "persistency" in research data, but this came up not as a native personality trait, but as a behaviour that described a systematic and goal-oriented way of working that can be learned.

There were also no findings to support the category of personal factors as a sales success driver. This category would comprise intra-individual factors, which are not part of the aptitude, skill level, motivation and role perceptions components like age or sales experience. In this research there were no results in this category, although it might be that the accumulated sales experience has influenced the formation of some competencies, but this was not perceived as a success driver itself.

As the results of this research indicates that behaviours reflecting skill levels and motivation were considered the most important sales drivers in the target organisation. Skill levels and motivation are also such entities that can be affected through learning and development structures. Overall, the results were in accordance with sales competency studies presented in the prior literate review in the chapter 2.5. Selling-related knowledge and skills, adaptiveness, cognitive aptitude, work engagement, goal orientation, customer orientation, systemic thinking, commercial thinking, and continuous learning abilities were all visible in results.

As an embodiment of the specific nature of the researched sales role in global and complex environmental technology and services field, the competencies concerning commercial and strategic thinking and collaboration skills that embed the way for team selling competencies were also clearly visible in research results.

2.) Learning and development of sales competencies

The second part of research results about learning and development of sales competencies in the context of the target company.

The averaged results (see picture 23. below) from the survey “Is Your’s a Learning Organisation” by Garvin et al. (2008) placed the company in the lowest bottom quartile in all the measured categories that were “Learning supporting environment”, “Concrete learning processes and practices” and “Learning re-enforcing leadership”. Based on the survey results from the sample, it can be concluded that the sales unit of the target company is not a learning organisation and there is a lot of areas for development.

	AVG Results (Color coded) :	Bottom Quartile	Second Quartile	Median	Third Quartile	Top Quartile
Supportive Learning Environment						
Psychological safety	**62,15**	31-66	67-75	**76**	77-86	87-100
Appreciation of differences	**56,25**	14-56	57-63	**64**	65-79	80-100
Openness to New Ideas	**57,15**	38-80	81-89	**90**	91-95	96-100
Time for Reflection	**55,70**	14-35	36-49	**50**	51-64	65-100
Learning Environment Composite Score:	**57,83**	31-61	62-70	**71**	72-79	80-90
Concrete Learning Processes and Practices						
Experimentation	**49,10**	18-53	54-70	**71**	72-82	83-100
Information Collection	**55,95**	23-70	71-79	**80**	81-89	90-100
Analysis	**55,00**	19-56	57-70	**71**	72-86	87-100
Education & Training	**36,90**	26-68	69-79	**80**	81-89	90-100
Information Transfer	**48,23**	34-60	61-70	**71**	72-84	85-100
Learning Processes Composite Score:	**46,28**	31-62	63-73	**74**	75-82	83-97
Leadership that reinforces learning						
Leadership that reinforces learning	**58,75**	33-66	67-75	**76**	77-82	83-100

Picture 23. Average results of the survey participants shown with colour coding.

The three main categories were also divided into subcategories. All the target company’s results were in the bottom quartile in results, except for the subcategory of “Time for Reflection” with the score of 55,70, where the company was positioned in the third quartile, close to the top results. The absolute single lowest score of 36,90 was given to the “Education and Learning” -subcategory under the concrete learning processes and practices that received the composite average score of 46,28.

The results from interviews, concerning the learning and development of sales competencies in the target organisation were generally described in negative terms. e.g., when asked about possibilities for learning and development, the salespeople answered *"None-existent.", "Meillä ei ole myynnin koulutusta. Infotilaisuuksia ja tuotedemoja on.", "I had random presentations and a visit to the manufacturer. But that visit was only for me.", "My manager tells me what to do and the rest I figure out myself.", "I read the product reel.", and "Product updates and videos come in regularly."* The compilation of avenues and methods of learning and development in the sales unit can be found from the table 2. below, which follows the classification of the learning opportunity types of informal, non-formal and formal learning as suggested in prior research.

Table 2. Compilation of the results of the learning and development of competencies at the target company.

Level of Learning	Informal	Non-formal	Formal
Indivual	•On-the job learning (Learning in the workplace through real work activities and interactions) •Individual analysis, self-reflection, action planning •Online or social media-based discussion forums	• Manager-subordinate relationship: One-to-One Mentoring: Directive support from an experienced person, who can advise and help to apply competencies.	
Unit	•Learner-generated content: Learners finding and uploading relevant resources on a theme, usually into a sales team- platform		•Trainer/Expert Input Presentations •Group Discussions •Webinars or Virtual Classrooms •Demonstrations

Based on the literature review in the chapters 2.2 and 2.3, learning and development of competencies takes place on individual, unit and organisational levels and can be informal, non-formal and formal. The research results reflect the notion that individual and unit level informal learning is the most significant avenue for developing professional expertise and new competencies in the target organisation from the perspective of the salespeople.

Based on the results, the salespeople learn and develop their individual success competencies through unstructured learning events at their own pace on-the job and through individual analysis, self-reflection and action planning or being active online e.g., in social media-based discussion forums. They also learn non-formally from the manager-subordinate relationship that in the target company can also be described as directive support or one-to-one mentoring from an experienced person.

Based on the results, unit level learning is either informal or formal. Informal learning takes mainly place through learner-generated content created and shared by the salespeople themselves mainly in the sales team- communication channel. Formal learning takes place through trainer/expert input presentations, group discussions, webinars or virtual classrooms and demonstrations. Even though there the results list multiple formal learning opportunities for the sales unit, they were not systematically organised, and the interviewed people did not hold them in high regard. Part of the reason for this may have been that these formal learning events were mainly organised by product manufacturers and were always partly commercial in nature. The salespeople did not perceive that formal learning opportunities that they had would have improve the competencies that would actually drive their sales performance.

In the literature review, in chapter 2.3. it is argued that all the identified sales competencies can also be learned and developed through informal learning opportunities. But a company that invests in RBV of strategy mentioned in the chapter 2.1 invests in strategically developing HRC to improve the internal configuration of its resources, and these investments were lacking at the time of this research, which may reflect in the results.

The top management of the company also concluded that because RBV of strategy is such a novel approach for the company, there hasn't been any effort in establishing a learning supporting environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and learning re-enforcing leadership that would consciously direct the development of strategic sales competencies. This also supported the salespeople's perception that all the aspects of learning organisation also described in chapter 2.2, were missing, or lacking in the sales unit.

The research results showed that the target organisation has several aspects that can be improved that would influence learning and development of the recognised sales competencies. According to the principles of RBV of strategy, the organisation can develop HRC through all three aspects of learning organisation: **1.)** Supporting learning environment, **2.)** Concrete learning processes and practices, and **3.)** Leadership that reinforces learning.

The research results from both the survey and interviews showed that the organisation has significant development opportunities in all three categories.

The learning and development based on the RBV of strategy should be directed to support the strategic resources that affect the organisation's capabilities and thus the competitiveness of the organisation as presented in the chapter 2.1. There is an opportunity to improve the planning of the learning and development opportunities linked with the strategic HRC according to recognised competency gaps based on the sales competency profile. The research results of sales competencies driving sales performance have created a possibility for creating a situationalist competency development framework as described in the chapter 2.4. in more detail. A competency development framework would enable systematic, continuous, and measurable competency-based learning processes and practices specially to support the individual and unit level learning and thus have an impact on RBV of strategy.

The research results show that the salespeople themselves actively use individual and unit level informal learning opportunities to reach new levels of expertise and new competencies in their role as seen in table X above. The same research results indicate that there is still a plenty of room to develop non-formal and formal opportunities of learning at the target organisation. Based on the learning and development theories and adult learning principles from the chapter 2.3, learners benefit the most, when they can influence their learning and have access to a variety of learning opportunities that complement each other. This creates an opportunity for the target organisation to co-create learning and development possibilities together with the salespeople specifically for the purposes of strategy.

The results show that due to the lack of organisation-led learning and development opportunities, the salespeople perceive that they lack learning and development, even though there are multiple learning opportunities available as seen in the table 2. There is an opportunity to improve the salespeople's perception of learning and development at the target organisation by creating a systematic and goal-oriented competency development framework.

In addition, there is room to take advantage of more varied learning opportunities to support individual learning like e.g. written exercises, case studies and analysis of real work examples, online learning modules (including e-learning opportunities and building e-portfolios), where a learner manages own learning through online learning modules, or preparing and delivering presentations, knowledge tests and quizzes that could offer adult learners the complementing individual possibility to continuously develop sales competencies and expertise levels at their own pace and at their own expertise levels as presented in chapter 2.3.

There are even more possibilities in developing non-formal learning and development opportunities for both individual learners and unit level needs. Peer-to-peer mentoring, one-to-one coaching, role play and skills practice events, group peer learning or action learning sets explained in chapter 2.3 are all untapped learning and development possibilities. Especially based on adult learning principles referred to in chapter 2.3, these learning opportunities that rely on learning from other learners are considered the most valuable source of learning that would enhance learner's commitment and motivation to learning.

4.4 Final Phase

In this phase, opportunities to improve the internal configuration of resources from the point of view of HRC were reflected based on the research results. Together with the management of the company it was decided that the development suggestion would focus on developing the learning and development processes and practices that can be considered an important pillar of learning organisation as mentioned in chapter 2.3. The decision was also supported by the research results as this aspect in the context of sales received lowest scores in the diagnostic survey of Garvin et al. (2008, 109) and were strongly criticised by the salespeople through interviews. The learning culture and learning re-enforcing leadership, could also have been focuses of the development work, but the research results and the target company's will dictate the direction of this development work. It is also notable that influencing any of the pillars of a learning organisation, the other aspects are bound to be affected as well as mentioned in chapter 2.2.

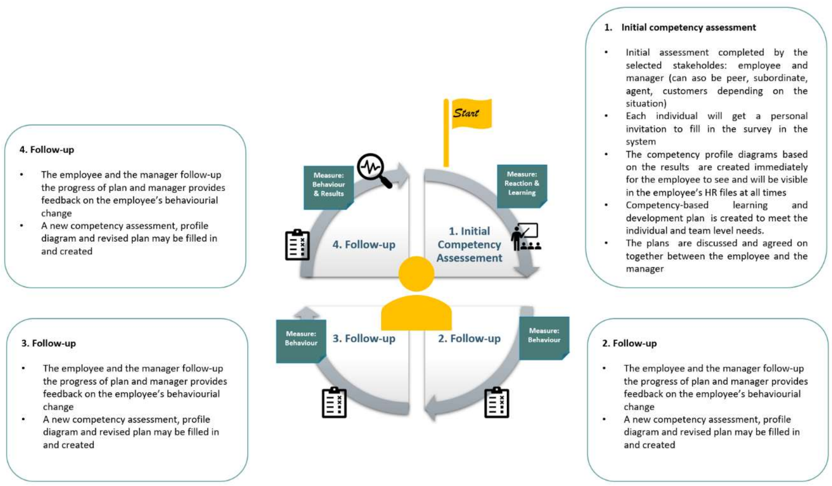
In the final project phase, the development suggestion in the format of competency development framework based on research results and the target organisation's resources was assembled and presented. The work took place in September 2020. The development work focused on designing a process to support systematic, continuous, and measurable learning and development of strategic competencies on individual and unit-level. The development suggestion was formed together with the COO, CIO, and a system configurator to align it to the resources, current practices, and automation possibilities of the target company.

Part of the process creation, I designed the tools to support the process in the context of the pilot project in the context of sales. These tools were the sales competency framework based on a sales-role competency profile, process description for creating a competency framework, a competency assessment tool and a collection of competency-based learning and development opportunities to support the planning of individual and unit-level learning and development journeys. All the tools were based on research results and this way co-created with the salespeople themselves. This co-creation model was strongly highlighted in chapter 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 to keep the tools relevant to the context and salespeople's commitment high.

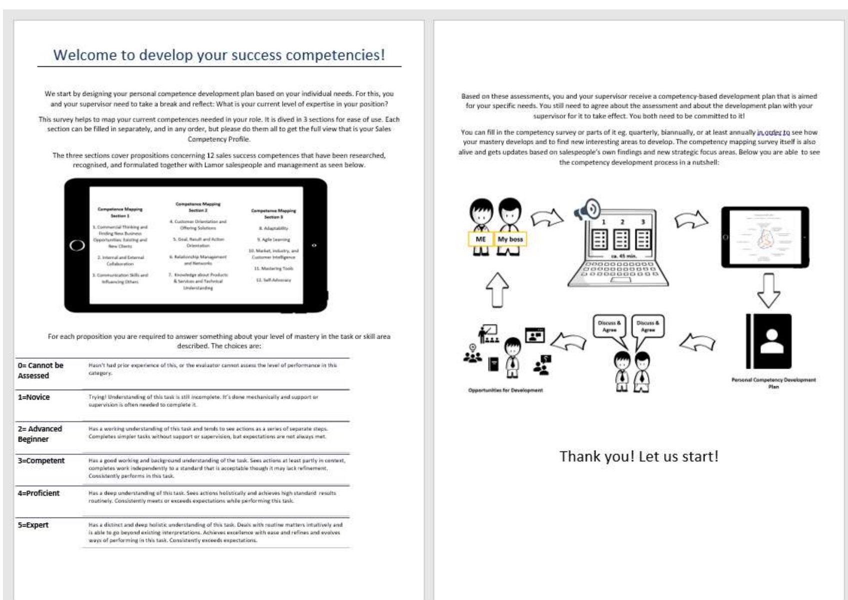
The overall process is a step-by-step cyclical and annual process for continuous competency-based individual and unit -level learning and development that could have an impact on sustainable competitiveness supported by the chapter 2.1. and on an individual level, this process considers the specifics of organisational adult learning described in chapter 2.3. In the centre of the process in the context of the sales unit is a situationalist and role-based competency framework referred to in chapter 2.4 that was co-created together with the salespeople and management through the research of sales competencies and learning and development described in the subchapter 4.3.1.

The process is divided into four quarterly steps that repeat annually starting from the initial competency gap analysis and creation of personal development plans including learning and development opportunities co-created with the management and other salespeople. The other steps are basically follow-ups that comprise reassessments and readjusted development plans to support goal-oriented learning journeys of the salespeople. The process itself also includes steps for assessing and adjusting the process itself. This process model offers an opportunity to actualize the single, double and deutero -learning loops described in the chapter 2.2. and can be seen as a tool to support the development of learning organisation.

As part of the process description, there are simple visualised guidelines for the organisation and for the individuals on how to take part in the assessment and development process as seen in picture 24. and 25. created with SAP Scenes -tool and integrated as part of the competency assessment tool in the target organisation's process management system. These guidelines are available for the assessed individuals at all times together with all the competency assessments and personal competency-development plans empowering the individual to take charge of the process as well.



Picture 24. Visualisation of an individual's continuing cyclical competency-based assessment and development process. Picture from the process description documents.



Picture 25. Visualised guidelines on how to the usage of competency assessment and development tool as part of the inhouse process management system

The process, for the purposes of the intended pilot project, includes the sales competency framework covering the situationalist sales competency profile that I created based on research results described in chapter 4.3.1. and visualised in picture 26. below. The framework of sales competencies is a needed first step in identification of the sales competencies that could be linked to improved sales performance.

Picture 26. Visualisations of the sales competencies from the sales competency framework documentation.

To create the possibility to re-evaluate and improve the competency framework also in the future mentioned in the process, the documentation also included an introduction and a step-by-step process description for researching and analysing a competency profile in the target company using the same methods as in this original research. The documentation also included a listing of observable behaviours linked to the manifestation of the identified competencies to support in recognition of the behavioural patterns linked to the sales success competencies in this framework. The behavioural repertoires in competency frameworks were referred to in the chapters 2.1, 2.4 and 2.5, and researched in the context with the targeted people. This document was designed for the target organisation's internal use in the context of sales and could be delivered as such or in part to selected stakeholders from salespeople to management and trainers within the organisation.

To support the individual and unit level competency gap analysis of the process, I designed an excel-based assessment instrument that has a weighted scoring system. This system was based and discussed on the results of the second focus group interview, where the identified competencies were scrutinised and evaluated.

The suggested competency gap scoring system calculated scores in different sales competency categories. Through the assessment tool, the salespeople can self-assess their expertise levels in the scale of being a novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert in each competency category. In addition to continuous and a systematic gap analysis, this assessment method supports adult learners steady advancement toward mastery mentioned in the chapter 2.3. If an employee has not had any experience in the described competency category, they can also choose not to assess that specific competency marking it as a totally new competency to be acquired. The competency gap assessment Excel can also be filled in by other stakeholders in addition to salespeople's own assessments. These additional results offer an opportunity to create a multifaceted idea of an individual's competency level's and assist in avoiding the most basic assessment bias that can alter the results.

In learning organisations, the unit-level learning is considered the next logical step following individual level of learning as mentioned in chapter 2.1. and 2.2. With the gap analysis instrument, a unit-level assessment is possible, if the salespeople's scores are averaged. It also presents the possibility to assess individual competency scores in comparison to a unit's average competency scores.

In addition to identifying competency gaps, these competency assessments are also intended to support the recognition of high expertise levels. Expert level individuals can be e.g., assigned as competency-based mentors and rewarded with mastery badges and other rewards to show the target organisation's support and appreciation of acquiring and developing competencies recognised to support the RBV of strategy.

The assessment tool was also designed and integrated to the target company's own process management system, and it automatically visualises the assessment scores as diagrams as seen in the picture 27. below. I designed the tool to hold multiple visualisations of scores to assist in grasping possible competency gaps. In extended use, the tool can compare self-assessment diagrams with other possibly available assessments by different stakeholders or with prior self-assessments, which increases a learner's understanding of own expertise and development toward mastery. This feature will give both the salesperson and manager more aspects for discussion in follow-up meetings concerning learning and development. This way the solution stays learner-centric and follows the principles of adult learning as explained in chapter 2.3.

Picture 27. A competency assessment diagram that compares simultaneously expertise scores from different sources.

For the in -house system integration purposes, the competency assessment tool was divided into three modules, which did not influence the actual usability of the solution from a user's point of view. The competency framework's content and the score counting systems are easily modifiable to ensure that the tool can keep up with basic changes and updates if the sales competency profile is readjusted. This feature is important considering the contextual and changing nature of the researched competencies as described in subchapters 2.4. and 2.3.

The assessment tool is designed to give an individual an opportunity for self-reflection, clarity, goal setting, motivation and in decreasing any role ambiguity that may hinder an individual's performance as explained in the subchapter 2.3. and 2.5. For the managers and trainers, the individual and unit level results are intended to be used as the bases for designing concrete individual and unit level competency development programs that link the learning and development goals together with the RBV of strategy goals and create an opportunity to design impactful and concrete learning practices as described in the sub-chapters 2.1 and 2.2.

After competency gaps are recognised, they need to be addressed as learning and development goals to improve the HRC important for competitiveness. This step in the process, is supported by a co-creation of an individual learning and development plan that is based on gap analysis and learning and development opportunities available and supported by the target organisation. For this purpose, I designed together with the COO of the target organisation, a development plan template directly to the in-house system. The personal development plan could pick individual and unit level learning and development opportunities from a list of informal, non-formal and formal learning opportunities that I compiled for this purpose. The list was based on research results of already existing learning opportunities described in chapter 4.3.1 and enriched with several learning and development methods described in chapter 2.3. These new opportunities were selected together with the COO of the target company and consisted of those methods that could be invested in by the target company to offer systematic opportunities for learning and development in the sales unit.

This document highlighted learning opportunities that supported both the learning of new competencies and the improvement of the level of mastery through applying competencies in practice, which are both required in competency-based learning and development as explained in the chapters 2.3. and 2.4. This list of learning and development opportunities is also left open for updates if the target organisation’s resources dedicated to learning and development change.

All and all the, during the final phase the development suggestion together with the tools for the sales unit pilot project were comprised and shared with the organisation’s management through continuously communicating through meetings, messages, and shared documents. The final phase can be considered to have ended in the end of November in 2020 after all the documents and updates had been delivered, reviewed, and discussed with the target company’s management and the system configurator, who was my counterpart in integrating the tools to the in-house process management system to automate the process as much as possible.

During the final phase of the project in November 2020, the target organisation started re-organising its operations including the sales unit resources.

5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I will summarise the research and reflect how the research succeeded in reaching its objectives. I assess the theoretical framework of the research and then continue to evaluate the research results and the development work suggestion. I will discuss about further research possibilities and will end the report with a self-reflective analysis of my own learning and development during this research process.

The theoretical framework of this research was divided to topic related literature review and the research design theories. The topic related literature review of this paper starts from the RBV of strategy, which is the principal assumption of the whole research and presented in the chapter 2.1. The purpose of the research was to assemble in depth insight as a bases of development work that aims at improving the competitiveness of the target company by developing its internal HRC. This purpose clearly follows the principals of RBV of strategy approach, which lead to the selection of the main theory for this research.

The RBV of strategy is based on the belief that the internal configuration of strategic resources forms the bases of an organisation's unique capabilities that are constant sources of competitiveness. This means that investing in the development of internal resources, and especially individual and unit level HRC like sales competencies, would bring sustaining competitive advantage to an organisation. The theory itself has evolved into a mainstream strategy management approach in the 2000's, but it also contains an obvious weakness. The RBV of strategy focuses on the internal resources of an organization leaving the external factors outside of its scope.

During the time of this research, in 2020, this research was strongly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic that enhanced this weakness of the RBV of strategy, and consequently, of all the related concepts and tools described in the chapters 2.1 to 2.5. In a situation, where macroenvironments change drastically, an emphasis on a strategic approach that focuses solely on developing internal configuration of resources seems very one sided and inadequate. For the purposes of developing a more holistic approach to support strategic development of the organisation, other strategy theories should be applied to complement the RBV of strategy to consider the external forces.

As a theoretical approach of this research, the RBV of strategy, is a very consistent entity and has strong principals to follow. It has a clear set of values that can easily guide strategic development of this sort. Still, during the research, it became obvious that despite the clear theoretical assumptions, the lack of practical concreteness in the RBV of strategy poses needs to complement the main theory with an increasing number of sub concepts and theories. Only by adding, theories of learning organisations (chapter 2.2) complemented by theories of organisational learning and development (chapter 2.3), followed by the theories of competency frameworks (2.4) was I able to create a holistic theoretical framework to support the research objectives in this case research. In addition, the sales competencies (chapter 2.5) were investigated in theory in order to adapt the RBV of strategy to the context of sales that was the targeted unit of development of this research.

Based on the RBV of strategy, the only possible tool for improving the HRC is the notion of learning organisations explained in chapter 2.2. The lack of options, in this theoretical framework makes it easy to select complementing theories and tools, but also makes comparison and selection of best situationalist tools impossible, if no effort is placed in creating new tools.

The concept of learning organisations carries the same defect as the whole RBV of strategy. It lacks concrete practices on how to actualize the principal assumptions of this theory making it more like a value-based notion to support the initial analysis and support the goal setting. Learning organisations offer an in depth and multi-dimensional outlook to organisations and on what to develop if an organisation intends to develop HRC as part of its internal configuration of resources. Development of tangible or intangible resources are outside the scope of this tool making it a very focused tool even though the initial idea of learning organisation emphasises systemic thinking in employees.

Due to the needs to bring the concept of learning organisations to practice in this development work, I chose to follow a ready-made three-pillar tool by Garvin et al. (2008) that was especially created for this sort of purposes. This decision influenced the actual research results and may lead into oversimplification of the concept in comparison to e.g., the Senge's five-dimensional concept of learning organisations. Still, a certain clarity of concrete steps was needed to bring this theoretical concept closer to practice and have an opportunity for analysis of the target organisation.

The concept of learning organisation in the chapter 2.2 filled the need of organisational development purposes of this development work, but to bring the learning and development to individual and unit-level, I continued to review literature of organisational learning and development presented in the chapter 2.4. In the context of organisational learning, I decided to investigate andragogy as a learning theory in this context as it is the only learning theory that concerns solely adult learning instead of learning of youths and children as well. The adult learning theory was also perceived as a valid choice for the purposes of learning professional competencies as it is in accordance with the RBV of strategy. This selection amongst the different learning theories was strongly influenced by the organisational context of learning. The selection of any other learning theory would have directed the development work toward different outcomes.

The prior research and theories of competency frameworks described in chapter 2.4. bring the principals of RBV of strategy to an actionable and measurable level for the purposes of this research. The decision to investigate the behavioural, role- specific situationalist competency frameworks was in accordance with the research topic and offered a method to link the perceptions of the salespeople themselves to the actual research process. If the competency profiles would have been individual or generic, the perceptions of the salespeople would have been of less importance. This decision also affected the research results as the focus was on behavioural repertoires that affected sales performance and not e.g., success in test results or measurements of native attributes like IQ. The role specificity of the competency framework affects the usability of the model. It is impossible to adopt this model as such to any other roles even in the target organisation. On the other hand, it offers an in-depth understanding of the competencies in this sales role, which is in line with the objective of this study.

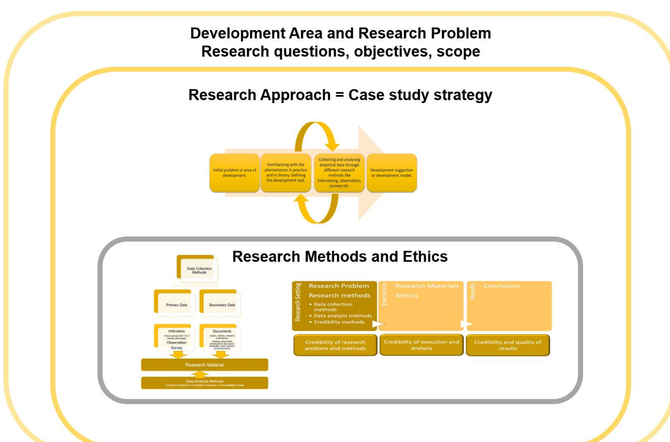
Competency frameworks are also bound to the time of their making. This competency framework needs to be renewed and researched as the business environment, sales responsibilities and strategic goals develop, making it a very sensitive and contemporary structure. It is most likely that the actual process of designing a competency framework together with all the stakeholders also carry importance in the identification and development of said competencies. In practice, this process was a dialogue that linked the strategic goals and individual learning goals together and created a common terminology about the matter.

Through the situationalist perceptions of the targeted people, the external factors are also somewhat present in the competency framework. In this case, the research results may already reflect the special macro-economic circumstances from the 2020 due to the Covid-19 early stages. Unfortunately, these effects cannot be singled out from the research results.

The final subchapter complementing the topical theoretical framework of this research, covered the prior research and theories of sales competencies in the chapter 2.5. Based on the principals of RBV of strategy, the identified sales competencies that drive sales performance are strategic competencies. There were a lot of prior research about the topic, and various results were emphasised depending on the research parameters in question. For these reasons, the literature review about sales competencies that drive sales performance, can be considered indicative as I was unable to assemble a matching collection of sales competencies for the purposes of this research. Instead, Verbeke et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of prior sales competency research presented an interesting and actionable comparative framework and a model for categorizing different sales competencies. This similar categorization should increase the usability of these research results to prior research results of sales competencies presented in more detail in chapter 4.3.1.

All and all, there were a lot of topical theory sources, which reflects to the length of the literature review. The decisions behind the selected theory in this research were guided by the research problem, research questions and objectives. The initial selection of RBV of strategy as the principal assumption of the whole research-based development work excluded the external factors outside the scope of this research.

The other part of the theoretical framework of this research-based development work consisted of research design theories presented in chapter 3 and its subchapters as seen in the picture 28. There is a vast number of academic, literate sources about research designs including research approaches and methods. In contrary, to topical theories, the sources of this line offer a very practical and detailed theoretical bases for the research.



Picture 28. Visualisation of theoretical framework of the selected research design

The research design of this paper starts with the formulation of the research problem, research questions and objectives in the chapter 3.1 and the definition of the research scope in the chapter 3.2 that are all important guiding factors of this research. Decisions of different theoretical propositions are all based on these definitions and limitations of this research. In the beginning, the whole research started as a development work, and it was easier to define the area of development that the research problem. Another important part in this stage was to include the sales context to the research questions. This limited the scope of research to focus on sales unit as a representation of organisation in RBV of strategy and learning organisation -theories. It also dictated that competency framework would be role specific and competencies to be researched would be expert level sales competencies. It can be that such a strong focus on sales competencies and learning and development especially of the salespeople in the target organisation may limit the further usability of this research even inside the target organisation. On the other hand, such strict limitations were needed to keep the research and development project in focus and facilitated the decision making along the process.

The development work was initially aimed for the benefit of a target organisation in a very specific manner, which strongly dictated the selection of research approach described in chapter 3.3. The case study -approach and process described in chapter 3.3.1 came out as the natural research strategy for the purposes of this contextual and contemporary research that aimed at in-depth insight concerning a single case. The case study strategy also offered needed flexibility in both qualitative and quantitative research methods to reach in-depth understanding about the researched phenomenon for the purposes of this research.

This research-based development work could have as well been a qualitatively oriented design or action study, if the development work would have included any actions to implement the development suggestion to practice. In retrospect, the case study strategy, offered a concrete framework in which the research took place. It also guided the selection of research methods described in the chapter 3.4 and its subchapters together with the research problem, questions, and objectives.

Another decisive element influencing the research methods of this research were the Covid-19 circumstances at the time of this research. It was disappointing to conclude already in the beginning of the research that e.g., live meetings and observations were out of the questions in part due to the guidelines of social distancing. The actual selection of research methods may have been different if not the special circumstances. Due to the lack of live opportunities, I placed more value in researching theories of e.g., virtual observation and observing digital communication channels. Due to these reasons, for me, it was also important to ensure that the triangulation of results would be well considered already in the selection of research methods as the choice of data collection methods was limited due to circumstances. All and all, the mix of data collection methods used in this research was very orthodox and clear focus was placed on interviews. On the other hand, the importance of interviews was enhanced as an important method of gaining in-depth understanding of research questions already in the topical theory and in the case study -strategy theory.

For the purposes of this study, I could have selected content or theme analysis methods as both served the purpose of this research. I selected the content analysis method presented in chapter 3.4.4, which is based on simplifying content in expressions and forming sets and subsets of the content of data. This seemed in theory to be a more structured solution also for combining content from multiple data collection sources in comparison to theme analysis that would have required drawing relational maps between the recognised themes. In retrospect, I think the content analysis supported the analysis the best especially because I was able to handle large quantities of data from different sources in a very structured manner throughout the whole data collection and analytics phase described in the chapter 4.3.

The research process itself fulfilled the needs of a case study research. The data was authentic and there was enough of it to reach credible interpretations and conclusions. The primary source of the data were the interviews that were successfully conducted to reach a clear saturation point when new interviews did not bring any new information. It stays unknown if the direct observations would have brought any differing research data.

The research results were intended to be the bases of this development work and to offer an insightful case of adaptation of the related theories in practice. The results were aimed to answer the research questions. The first research question was derived from the purposes of the RBV of strategy as there is a clear need to identify the exact sales competencies that are important in driving sales performance in the target company. Through the selected research methods, I ended up with the compilation of 11 sales competencies that would fulfil the criteria presented in chapter 4.3.1.

The identified sales competencies reflect the situationalist interpretation of sales competencies at the target organisation. From the point of view of adaptation of relevant theory to practice, this research offers a new case example of variables of sales drivers that enriches the amount of prior research about competencies driving sales performance.

The research brought out a unique configuration of sales competencies that drive sales performance in the target organization and these results can be used as a case example of sales competencies of an organization that operates in environmental technology field in a very complex partnership ecosystem. The research results also re-enforced some prior research results indicating that competencies in the categories of Verbeke et al. ‘s (2011) meta-analysis describing interpersonal skills, selling related knowledge, adaptiveness, goal orientation and work engagement are important determinants of sales success based on this case study research. The results also supported the theory that the growing importance of the information society is reflected in the needs of high levels of sales related knowledge in salespeople also presented in chapter 2.5. The research results did not bring out any new findings that would not be supported by prior research. But instead, they presented in-depth and multifaceted insight about the sales competencies at the target organisation, which is in line with the purpose of this research.

The second research question presented in the chapter 3.1 is about understanding how the learning and development of sales competencies at the target organisation takes place. The research results emphasised individual informal learning as the primary method for learning and developing sales competencies. Individual non- formal and unit-level formal learning methods were present in the results but held less importance. In a sense, these results can be considered to re-enforce the principals of adult learning mentioned in the chapter 2.3. The andragogical model state that adults tend to be independent and very self-directive learners and the research results enforce this assumption. On the other hand, the results, can also be considered to reflect the situation in the target organisation, where there are practically no systematic learning and development processes and practices in place leaving the learner with the only option of individual informal learning as the main means of any learning and development.

The research results supporting the second research question, enforced the target company’s perception on the current situation, but it also revealed a disparity amongst the salespeople. Some learning opportunities like certain product technology demos by the manufacturers, were thought to be unit-level opportunities, but in fact, only people from certain time zones were able to participate them in practice. I categorised this learning opportunity still as a unit-level formal learning opportunity even though this might not be the case as a rule. These research results offer more insight about the overall learning and development of the sales competencies at the target organisation, but they might not be accurate in all cases. All and all, no unambiguous conclusions can be made based on these research results.

The third research question concerned how to develop learning and development of competencies in individual and unit level. The survey results pinpointed structural categories for development that followed the principals of learning organisations that is very much in line with the needs of the RBV of strategy. These results revealed multiple development opportunities from the organisation's point of view like the opportunity to develop learning culture, concrete learning and development processes and leadership. The research results based on observations, interviews and analysis of documents also showed that a multiple methods of individual and unit level learning found from theory in chapter 2.3 and 2.4 were not in use in the target organisation and could be listed as development opportunities.

The research results for this research question offered a holistic view of all the learning and development possibilities. They also revealed a lot of opportunities for further investment, if the management decides to continue improving its competitiveness based on the RBV of strategy. On the other hand, the results themselves were a bit overwhelming and in need of prioritisation. These research results did not really bring anything to the wider research community but focused rather on analysing opportunities for development on organisational, unit and individual level at the target organisation.

All and all, for the purposes of this case study research, the research results successfully brought much needed insight, common consensus, and structured information especially about the sales competencies that drive sales performance in a very complex global B2B sales environment in the environmental technology field, were part of the sales is formed through crisis and catastrophes.

The research results focusing on aspects of learning and development of competencies are affected by the fact that the target organisation lacked systematic and established learning and development structures. This means that in the end, the research results of learning and development did not point out real unambiguous differences between informal, formal, and non-formal learning and development of sales competencies in the target organisation. Instead, the research results gave more information on how the researched salespeople gain and develop their expertise in this sort of environment and what opportunities of development there are, if the RBV of strategy is implemented to the organisation.

The purpose of this research was to gain in-depth insight of the learning and development of important sales competencies at the target company. This insight would be then used as the bases for a development proposal to address the RBV of strategy needs of the target organisation. In this sense, the research results offered plenty of insight and opportunities for development. The research results offered too many avenues for development. The development proposal needed to be more focused, and an executive decision was required from the target company's management about the priority of development.

The development suggestion follows the RBV of strategy principals and assumes that developing internal resources like sales competencies has a positive effect on competitiveness. In this case the research results were used as a bases of a proposed competency development framework and a process to support and scale it. Basically, an annual and adjustable process is suggested for supporting continuous individual and unit -level competency development thus addressing the need to have concrete learning processes and practices in place.

The process uses a sales competency profile as an assessment instrument and suggests informal, non-formal and formal individual and unit-level learning and development opportunities to address competency gaps emphasised through assessments. The proposed tools supporting the process like a situationalist sales competency profile, gap analysis instrument and development plan templates to the specific needs of the sales unit, are strictly based on the in-depth understanding of the researched sales competencies and their development.

The proposed process itself would ensure that the organisation has a capability to renew itself and can be thus considered a learning organisation. In the process description, the adult learners are empowered to take charge of their own development based on their own assessments, and they can co-create learning and development opportunities with their management and peers. The theoretical framework and all the expected outcomes of the research were used as the bases of all the tools that are used in the competency development framework proposed in this development work.

The proposed process and the competency development framework contain the in-depth understanding of the target organisation's goals, salespeople's role specific competencies and competency-based learning and development opportunities within the organisation's resources. Even though the development proposal is designed based on the most accurate data from the time of the research, the usability of the framework itself can be questioned due to the dramatic changes in the business environment due to the Covid-19. The changes taking place outside the scope of the organisation's own resources pose threats on usability of such proposals that do not take these changes into account in any way.

On the other hand, the competency development framework is only valid for the development purposes of the target company's sales unit and salespeople as it is based on the research that was limited to them and did not aim at creating universal understanding outside this single case. The proposed process for supporting systematic learning and development of individual and unit-level competencies can be duplicated in the target company for the use of other strategic units recognised by the RBV of strategy, but the process is still very much designed for the purposes of this target organisation and cannot be adopted to other cases as such.

The development proposal concentrates solely on improving learning and development of processes and practices of the target organisation. This keeps the work focused, but also leaves out some important aspects like the learning culture and leadership that both play a part in learning and development. The development proposal does not contain all the possible aspects of developing learning and development or aspects of learning organisation that are possible in the target company. It can be considered to address the development area only in part. This also means that the proposal does not take full advantage of the opportunities presented by the in-depth understanding that was the purpose of this case study research.

The development proposal was done in close cooperation with the management, salespeople, and system configurator of the target organisation, who all perceives the proposal as a viable way for improving sales competencies and thus the competitiveness of the company from strategic, process and system point of views.

Of course, the development proposal's final validity would be seen if it is implemented into practice. I think that the strength of this sort of development work is based on the research results and continuous collaboration from all the stakeholders. This process and method increase the credibility and usability of implementation of the proposal. The process and tools are partly automatised, but also partly left for the managers and employees themselves to agree on. This flexibility that is purposefully built in the proposal is one of its strengths and weaknesses. In part, it better accommodates adult learning principles in encouraging the learner participation in the process. On the other hand, the solution is dependant of the level of execution by the people involved in the process.

As a conclusion, the overall objective of the case-study research was to gain in-depth understanding of sales competencies that drive sales performance in the target company, learning and development of those competencies and how to possibly develop the competency-based learning and development structures in the target company. These objectives were achieved through case study research strategy and selected research methods.

The in-depth understanding from the research was used as the bases of development proposal to support the RBV of strategy investments at the target organisation. Based on RBV of strategy theory, an improvement to internal configuration of strategic resources should lead to increased levels of competitiveness. Even though this research-based development work should, in theory, deliver improved degrees of competitiveness to the target organisation, this belief is truly tested upon its implementation due to the unexpected changes in business environment on a global scale caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is unclear, if the whole RBV of strategy approach will be affected by these changes in business environments during the following years.

5.1 Suggestions for further research

In this chapter I will present my point of views for the further research and use of this research. I researched the contemporary sales competencies in the target organisation operating in global environmental technology field through a single case study. The research could be of further use if similar research could be conducted together with another company or other companies from the same field. This would offer an opportunity to perform some comparative research about the strategic sales competencies and their development in this less researched field of business.

This research was followed the case study research process with the purpose of gathering in-depth insight to support a development suggestion. A natural progress from here would be to conduct another qualitative research, for example, action research, about the implementation of the said development suggestion in practice. It would be a beneficial to research if the implementation of the development proposal, would affect the competitiveness of the target organisation. Another extension of this research would be to research how the development suggestion would scale to another critical units in the target company.

Another aspect of further research would be to research, how the researched sales competencies change after a year or two years. It would be interesting to see if the sales competencies considered important from the point of view of RBV of strategy in 2020 at the target group have developed due to the changes caused by the pandemic.

5.2 Self-Reflection

This research offered me the opportunity to study RBV of strategy related literature in a larger scale. The process of building the theoretical framework for this thesis deepened my understanding of strategic management and its tools in practice.

I had the opportunity to conduct my research in collaboration with an international company that operates in a demanding, and complex business environment. I was fascinated by the idea of researching something that might prove to be beneficial for the needs of salespeople and management, which is also very much in line with my studies. Sales has always been an interesting unit to me as the salespeople are the ones facing head on the turbulent and ever-changing markets while fulfilling an organisation's chosen strategy in a very concrete and visible way.

In this research, I invested time and effort in familiarizing myself with literature concerning the RBV, learning organisations, learning and development of competencies, competency frameworks and sales competencies in general. I found it rewarding to combine and apply these theoretical frameworks in the context of real salespeople in the target organisation.

The most challenging part of the research process was to gather and internalize such a vast amount of related academic literature while keeping the objectives of the research clear. The research topic itself lied in between the fields of strategic management, HR management and sales management and all the aspects needed to be included to the research for it to be thorough and relevant. In the end, I am happy that the different pieces found their places in the research and became integrate parts of the research and development work.

This research also gave me the opportunity to hone my interviewing competencies and I must admit that despite my already extensive background in international business, or maybe because of it, I found it increasingly interesting to interview salespeople across the globe. It was rewarding to discuss about their ideas and experiences of success and success competencies in their role. I wish that I would have had the opportunity to meet and interview all of them face-to- face, but I also think that this experience has increased my communication skills and my ability to manage communication through different channels.

One of the requirements of the project was to balance between the technological system and process requirements of the target company when designing the development suggestion. It was interesting to support the organisation in integrating the model to their process management system, even though it did not add any value to the actual outcome of this case study research itself.

During this research, I had the opportunity to refresh and apply my research, project management, documentation, and visualization skills from a new perspective. During the research I investigated extensively case study- approach and research methods, which makes me feel more confident in using this approach again in business or in academic settings.

I enjoy doing meaningful tasks and supporting Finnish businesses in their strategic development can be considered valuable and meaningful. I think that the target organisation will truly benefit from this research and development suggestion. The best benefit would be for the target company to see through all the applications of the framework and establish the model as routine part of their management and development practices. This way the framework will start its cyclical life and will be further shaped through salespeople’s experiences and changes in the strategy and business environment and becoming a living part of the organisatory capital.

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Survey template

The Learning Organization Survey (Garvin, D. Edmondson, A., and Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization? *Harvard Business Review*, *March*: 109-116). Survey available: https://hbs.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b7rYZGRxuMEyHRz

David Garvin, Amy Edmondson, Francesca Gino

This diagnostic survey is designed to help you determine how well your company functions as a learning organization. The self-assessment items are divided into three sections, each representing one building block of organizational learning. Respondents should rate, on a seven-point scale, how accurately each statement describes the **organizational unit** in which s/he works. In the third block, the task is to rate how often senior managers (or manager) exemplify the behaviour described. Items with an asterisk (*) should be reverse scored.

BUILDING BLOCK 1

Supportive Learning Environment

Psychological Safety

In this unit, it is easy to speak up about what is on your mind. If you make a mistake in this unit, it is often held against you.*

People in this unit are usually comfortable talking about problems and disagreements.

People in this unit are eager to share information about what does and doesn't work.

Keeping your cards close to your vest is the best way to get ahead in this unit.*

Appreciation of Differences

Differences in opinion are welcome in this unit.

Unless an opinion is consistent with what most people in this unit believe, it won't be valued.*

This unit tends to handle differences of opinion privately or off-line, rather than addressing them directly with the group.*

In this unit, people are open to alternative ways of getting work done.

Openness to New Ideas

In this unit, people value new ideas.

Unless an idea has been around for a long time, no one in this unit wants to hear it.*

In this unit, people are interested in better ways of doing things. In this unit, people often resist untried approaches.*

Time for Reflection

People in this unit are overly stressed.*

Despite the workload, people in this unit find time to review how the work is going.

In this unit, schedule pressure gets in the way of doing a good job.* In this unit, people are too busy to invest time in improvement.* There is simply no time for reflection in this unit.*

BUILDING BLOCK 2

Concrete Learning Processes and Practices

Experimentation

This unit experiments frequently with new ways of working.

This unit experiments frequently with new product or service offerings.

This unit has a formal process for conducting and evaluating experiments or new ideas.

This unit frequently employs prototypes or simulations when trying out new ideas.

Information Collection

This unit systematically collects information on competitors

This unit systematically collects information on economic and social trends •

This unit systematically collects information on customers

This unit systematically collects information on technological trends

This unit frequently compares its performance with that of competitors

This unit frequently compares its performance with that of best-in-class organizations

Analysis

This unit engages in productive conflict and debate during discussions.

This unit seeks out dissenting views during discussions.

This unit never revisits well-established perspectives during discussions.*

This unit frequently identifies and discusses underlying assumptions that might affect key decisions.

This unit never pays attention to different views during discussions.*

Education and Training

Newly hired employees in this unit receive adequate training.

Experienced employees in this unit receive periodic training and training updates

Experienced employees in this unit receive training when switching to a new position

Experienced employees in this unit receive training when new initiatives are launched

In this unit, training is valued.

In this unit, time is made available for education and training activities.

Information Transfer

This unit has forums for meeting with and learning from experts from other departments, teams, or divisions

This unit has forums for meeting with and learning from experts from outside the organization

This unit has forums for meeting with and learning from customers and clients

This unit has forums for meeting with and learning from suppliers

This unit regularly shares information with networks of experts within the organization.

This unit regularly shares information with networks of experts outside the organization.

This unit quickly and accurately communicates new knowledge to key decision makers.

This unit regularly conducts post-audits and after-action reviews.

BUILDING BLOCK 3

Leadership That Reinforces Learning

My managers invite input from others in discussions.

My managers acknowledge their own limitations with respect to knowledge, information, or expertise.

My managers ask probing questions.

My managers listen attentively.

My managers encourage multiple points of view.

My managers provide time, resources, and venues for identifying problems and organizational challenges.

My managers provide time, resources, and venues for reflecting and improving on past performance.

My managers criticize views different from their own point of view.*

Attachment 2. 1-to-1 Theme Interview Invitation and Template

Hi!

As XXXXXX mentioned in the sales meeting, I am approaching some of you with an interview and survey requests. I would like to invite you to partake a survey and an interview to discuss about your point of views of **success competencies I your role and how to develop them**. Competencies are here seen as **knowledge, skills, attitudes, and contacts that cause and forecast success in your job**.

The purpose of the interview is to collect experiences and perceptions of competencies and learning and development in your unit directly from the salespeople themselves. The information will be later used for the purposes of developing a competency development model for the sales unit. I will also use the interview data as research material for my own Master's thesis about the same topic. Any information will be presented anonymously in all use cases and collected from various sources like from the salespeople and management interviews, observations and other documents making it impossible to recognize any individual source of information.

Here is the link to the survey that helps to diagnose the development areas of learning and development: XXXX. The survey is completely anonymous, and your data is not saved anywhere. The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete, and your scores are presented in the end. Please take a picture or a screenshot of the scorecard and send it to me before our interview. The scores and how they met your expectations are one of the themes that we will discuss.

Participating the survey and interview is totally voluntary. Participation will give you an excellent opportunity to influence possible future learning and development structures of your role. Interview will be recorded, but only you and I will have access to the recording and your personal survey results.

The interview is estimated to take about an hour but will depend on how much we have topics of discussion. I'm free in between XX-XX on XXXX and between XX-XXX on XXXX. Will either of the times suit you? Below are the interview themes, but let's discuss about the topics that come up as well.

BR,
Katriina Lindberg

Theme 1: Success competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and contacts) required in your role.
Theme 2: Behaviors indicating these competencies in practice. (EG. (Describe a successful project and what you did to influence the outcome.)
Theme 3: Learning and development of these success competencies: now and in the future
Theme 4: Your scores in the survey: how did they align with your expectations?

Attachment 3. First Focus Group Theme Interview Template

Theme1: Strategic learning and development in the organisation: now and in the future.
Theme2: Strategic goals for sales and how the job of the salespeople is forecasted to change.
Theme3: Sales success competencies: now and in the future.
Theme4: Behaviours of the most successful salespeople.

Attachment 4. Second Focus Group Theme Interview Template

Theme1: Compilation of the sales success competencies.

Theme2: Behavioural indicators linked to each sales success competency.

Theme3: Importance of behavioural indicators in terms of each success competency.

Material used in the discussion: An excel-sheet containing the data analysis of the research data concerning the sales competencies.

Attachment 5. Compilation learning and development methods

Based on the Bailey et al. 2018, 212; Beevers et al. 2020 103-104; Knowles et al. 2015, 87; Marcos Cuaves et al. 2016, 221-222.

Face-To-Face Training	**Individual/Unit**	**Possible Pros**	**Possible Cons**
Trainer Input (Presentation)	**Unit**	Effective and quick way to pass on information. Distributing "common" message. Learners can ask questions and clarifications. Initial information for use within further learning activities. Takes pressure off learners when they might be feeling uncertain.	Boring, too long. Little learner involvement. Offers no ownership of learning. Low retention of information. Dependant on the quality of the presentator's skills.
Demonstration	**Unit**	Effective and quick way of passing on information. Often a crucial first step in competency development. Allows learner to see activity done competently and sets a benchmark.	Demonstrator may pass on bad habits. Task might be oversimplified for demo purposes. Demonstration may not reflect circumstantial constraints of performing the task.
Group Discussion	**Unit**	Huge and multifaceted source of learning. Learner's own ideation and experiences are taken part of larger learning structure. Sharing aspects challenges learners' resistance to change and diminishes personal limitations. Enables learner-led learning,	Inequal participation to discussion. Domination of strong personalities. Discussion may stray from the focus. Dependant on the quality of the facilitator's skills.

		engages learners, and enhances ownership of learning.	
Videos and the use of actors	**Unit/Individual**	Effective and quick way to pass on information with some variety. Makes learning often more interesting. Accessible, wide-ranging, and current. Can be produced to meet a particular need. Use of actors (hired professionals or existing employees, managers, clients, partners) allows customization of presented scenarios and can make practice more real than e.g., in role playing in the learner group. Uploading videos to own devices and commenting them builds ownership of learning.	Can be too generic and outdate fast. Copyright issues. Quality assurance can be difficult. May not reflect correct approaches or good practice. Actors or the production can be expensive.
Expert speakers	**Unit**	Adds variety to the input of information. Learners tend to respect "experts". Expert's ability to talk about and answer questions about real situations. Expert's ability to enthuse the learners through their passion and proficient speech.	Speaker may be biased about the information. Availability and price of an expert speaker. Dependant on the quality of the expert's professional and speaker skills.
Learner activities			

Written exercises, case studies, real work examples	**Individual**	Allows learners to work together in an in-depth way and learn from each other. Helps learners to shift into deeper level of learning and concentration. Opportunity to apply knowledge and skills. Enables transition of knowledge to activity. Creates business and development opportunities. Provides assessment opportunities	Assignments need to be well constructed to be valid and credible. May be dependent on access to real and realistically possible business cases. Confidentiality and data protection issues may occur. Can be a "low-energy" activity.
Preparing and delivering presentations, knowledge tests and quizzes	**Individual**	Lifts energy levels, whilst still focusing on the learning focus. Learners can check their level of knowledge and fill gaps. Provides business and development opportunities. Provides assessment opportunities	Tends to be more about knowledge retention than application. Can create competition and division in a group of learners.
Role-play /try-outs and skill practice	**Unit**	Allows learners to work together to share knowledge and experience. Lifts energy levels, whilst still focusing on the learning focus. Opportunity to act out procedures and skills in safe environment. Starts the transition of knowledge and skills to real work activities.	Artificial and not representing actual work. Learners tend to be more positive when asked to do "skills practice" or "try-outs" than "role-play". Requires good feedback skills from the stakeholders.

Individual analysis, self-reflection, action planning	**Individual**	Re-enforces the competency need identification and ownership of own learning. Links learning with goals. Motivational. Help in transferring learning to real work activities. Provides the means for later evaluation.	Can be a "low-energy" activity that requires honesty and concentration. Learners may face uncomfortable feelings.
On-job training			
Learning in the workplace through real work activities	**Individual**	Learning and practicing essential job skills. Timely as training is provided when its needed. Learner learns the realities of work. Informal learning from expert colleagues and managers. Engages learner's manager in the training. No major reductions on work time.	May obscure the bigger picture. Offers no time to reflect on learning or asking questions. Daily urgencies may interfere with the quality of the training. Learner may feel uneasy about admitting weaknesses in this setup.
Coaching and Mentoring			
One-to-One Coaching: Non-Directive support from a coach to support the learner to develop and apply their competencies	**Individual**	Source of continuous learning. Improves competencies and behaviors linked with performance. Builds confidence, self-awareness and self-management skills. Activates learner and increases learner's ownership of learning and responsibility of own development.	Dependant on the quality and competencies of the coach. Coach's style and personality may clash with the learner's style which may cause a counter reaction and anxiety.

		Tailored to learner needs. Clarifies own thinking and offers avenues for reflection. Challenges limiting assumptions. Avenue for planning further development and improvement actions. Motivating and goal orientating. Reduces stress and frustration levels. Heightened understanding of own work role, the organisation and own contribution to the organisation. Helps in creating a learning culture to an organisation.	
One-to-One Mentoring: Directive support from an experienced person, who can advise and help learner to apply competencies	**Individual**	Builds confidence, self-awareness, and self-management skills. Improves performance related competencies and behaviors. Helps in establishing networks and improve relationships. Tailored to learner needs. Covers wide range of areas. Clarifies own thinking and offers avenues for reflection. Challenges limiting assumptions. Source of continuous learning. Avenue for planning further development and improvement actions.	Mentor role may conflict with the line manager role. Dependant on the availability of mentors.

		Motivating and goal orientating. Reduces stress and frustration levels. Heightened understanding of own work role, the organisation and own contribution to the organisation. Improves individual ownership of development. Offers role models. Enhances retention and transfer of knowledge and learning in organisation. Helps in creating a learning culture to an organisation.	
Peer Learning /Action Learning Sets (Group peer mentoring): Groups meet to support each other through work projects and to share learning and ideas	**Unit**	Creates new ideas and different perspectives. Spreads good practices. Builds team/group support networks and improves collaboration. Possibility to learn from other's experiences and ask questions. Saves time in learning. Outlet for discussing and resolving workplace frustrations. Encourages learner's and team's own and shared ownership of learning and actions.	Dependant on others wanting to be involved parties of the learning group. Sustaining the group may be challenging -requires discipline and commitment. Certain group dynamics may hinder development or create unwanted social pressures.
E-learning			

Online Learning Modules (e-learning, e-portfolios): Learner manages own learning through online learning modules	**Individual**	Effective for acquiring and re-capping knowledge. Allows learning at own pace. Flexible and accessible. Able to grow and change. Time-Efficient. Brings cost savings over time and is Inexpensive for large number of learners. Learner statistics can be collected, and effectiveness of learning evaluated. Continuing feedback.	There are a lot of bad designs in e-learning available. Learning happens only individually without the shared learning experience. Initial investment is high May require extra equipment or IT skills. Commitment from both learner and trainer and sometimes from other assessors and mentors to give feedback is required. The systems and content need constant revirew and updating.
Learner-Generated Content: Learners finding and uploading relevant resources on a theme, usually into a messaging platform or LMS that can be accesses by the learner group	**Unit/Individual**	Enhances learner involvement and engagement. Enriches the amount, novelty, and quality of learning resources. Brings together more resources for development, instead of relying on a single trainer. Learners active role in content creation and delivery. Results in a unique group-curated collection of resources, which can be added to, updated, and used after active training events.	Quality of learning resources varies. Collected resources need validating and curating.

Online or social media-based discussion forums: Chat rooms, messaging hubs, forums, or social media platforms such as Twitter or Slack to support learner communication and networking	**Unit**	Spreads perceptions and perspectives. Clarifies uncertainties with peers and supports social learning. Offers an avenue for reflecting and reviewing an activity. Enables real-time discussion about a common theme. Efficient especially in providing "Just-in-Time" learning and messages. Possibility to converse with a wide range of contributors. Brings in experts and others not involved in the actual learning event. Learners can participate as and when they choose. Learner is social and collaborative. Very flexible and accessible. Easily scalable for small and large groups. Cost efficient. Offers an avenue for informal learning and learning in many levels.	Some learners may be alienated by or lack the skills to access discussions. Discussions need moderation with good skills. Asynchronous discussions can be frustrating. Need to wait for comments or replies on posts. Can increase the learners time in social media and on own devices that may conflict company protocol. Disrupts and distracts from work when accessed during the worktime. Level of learning may be difficult to evaluate. Trainer's lack of constant control may focus the discussion astray. Reluctancy for combining social sites with ones related to work and learning. Learners have their own preferences of avenues.

Webinars or Virtual Class-rooms	**Unit**	Facilitates face-to-face train-ing. Effective and time-efficient way for acquiring knowledge where some level of interac-tion is also needed. Highly accessible and scala-ble for small and large groups. Relatively inexpensive and greener option. Reaches geographically spread audiences. Different features like poll-ing, drawing, and texting tools improve usability. Offers flexibility in training design.	Technology risks. Difficulties in controlling the contributions from learners. Learners may "switch off" and not pay atten-tion. Online learning is found less engaging. Less interaction, espe-cially with a larger audi-ence. May be repetitive and sticks to the same for-mat partly due to plat-form limitations. Requires strong pres-ence from the trainer. Initial set up costs may be high.