Tampere University of Applied Sciences

# Sales Skills in Digitally Transforming Companies

## Developing a Skill Map for Sales Representatives

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose was to deepen the understanding of digital sales skills that Finnish companies need in digitally transforming companies. This was be done through a review of academic research and empirical research in the form of semi structured thematic interviews. The objective was to develop a map of digital sales skills for salespeople. The study was conducted for the ROBINS research project that took place in the Tampere Universities in 2019-2021.

A constructivist research approach was chosen as the research method because it is specifically suited for a study that aims to a model. Interviews were held with sixteen CEOs and other management level professionals in 15 Finnish small and medium sized companies.

Based on the academic and empirical research a skill map for sales representatives is presented in this thesis.

The findings suggest that salespeople will continue to need traditional sales skills even in companies that are transforming or have already transformed digitally. But salespeople will have to learn to use those skills through digital tools and technologies. Further research should focus on validating the skill map and researching sales representatives' views themselves.

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Key words: digital sales skills, sales, digital transformation

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## GLOSSARY

| | |
|---|---|
| AI | artificial intelligence |
| AR | augmented reality |
| CRM | customer relationship management |
| VR | virtual reality |

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Technological cliches are abound in common parlance: artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics will take our jobs, not only do we have to know how to use digital tools, but we should also be able to code to survive in the job market, VR/AR technologies will close the boundaries between real and virtual life etc. Either you get scared and resist or embrace the change and thrive. This is a black and white framing of the situation. Yet, technological change has affected every industry and occupation. Industries and businesses have been digitalizing their operations for years, some more so, some less so. Investing in digital tools and technologies has required employees to change their behaviors and ways of working. In the companies that have yet to embark on or are in the early stages of their digital transformation journey, are still to fully realize the shift in skills and competences the new world requires. These skill requirements are what this master's thesis aims to investigate. What are the skills salespeople will need in digitally transforming companies?

## 1.1 Background

The research was done as part of ROBINS research project at the Tampere Universities between 2019-2021. The research investigated the effects of AI and robotics on sales in Finnish enterprises (Tampere University & Tampere University of Applied Sciences, n.d.). As part of this research, I interviewed 16 sales, marketing, digital, and commercial managers about their views on digital transformation: what it means for them, how it is done in their companies, what it means in sales and marketing and what kind of skills they think are needed from salespeople?

## 1.2 Purpose and objective of the thesis

The purpose of this master's thesis is to deepen the understanding of digital sales skills that Finnish companies need in rapidly changing business environments. This is to be done through a review of related academic research and empirical research in the form of interviews with company managers. The objective was to develop a map of digital sales skills for salespeople to better understand what skills they need to develop. It needs to be noted that this research does not aim to evaluate or rank companies in terms of their level of digital transformation. The aim was to better understand – from the managerial perspective – what kind of skills they think are needed in the sales force as companies digitally transform.

# 2 METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 Selected research approach

### 2.1.1 Constructivist research approach

According to Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti (2014) a constructivist research approach is a specifically suitable approach to use when the goal of research is to create a plan, a model, or a new solution to a situation. Constructivist approach aims to create a new structure as a solution to a problem. To do this, the research needs to combine both theoretical information and empirically collected data. The goal, then, is to develop a new and theoretically justified solution that provides new information for the business and the scientific community. (Ojasalo et al, 2014, 65). Furthermore, the approach requires that the solution is proved to work during the research process itself. As such, it is a challenging approach to take. Despite these challenges, I chose the constructivist approach for this master's thesis because the objective of the thesis is to create a digital sales skill map and contribute to the research in sales skills. Therefore, the thesis has a concrete output supported by theoretical frameworks and, as such, the constructivist approach is well suited as a research approach as stated by Ojasalo, et al. (2014).

### 2.1.2 Constructivist research process

The process of constructivist research is presented below (Figure 1). It is adapted from Ojasalo et al. (2014, 67).

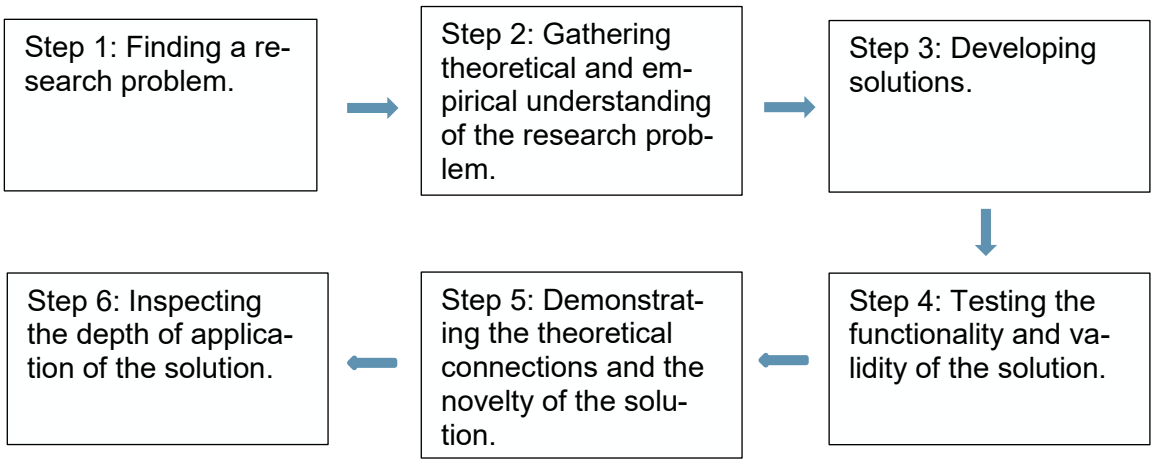


FIGURE 1. The constructivist research process, adapted from Ojasalo et al. (2014, 67).

The first step, finding a research problem, was developed in the ROBINS research project. The second step of gathering theoretical and empirical understanding of the research topic was done by examining academic literature and conducting interviews during the research. Based on this examination and the analysis of the interviews, a solution – a digital sales skill map – was developed. Steps 2 and 3 are exemplified in sections 3, 4 and 5 in this thesis.

### 2.1.3 Validity of the research

One part of the constructivist research approach is to validate the solution presented in the research. This should be done at least in the company/companies where the research was conducted but preferably also elsewhere. But as Ojasalo et al. (2014, 65) note, that solution's workability is often difficult to show in practice and requires extra work. This is particularly difficult in master's thesis where there is a limited time frame to get the research done. This is exactly the case with this master's thesis. The skill map developed in this thesis has not been validated with the interviewed companies nor with other companies. Therefore, half of the

required steps for the constructivist research process have not been taken (steps 4-6). Thus, the research is not fully valid in terms of its research approach.

## 2.2 Semi-structured themed interviews

To deepen the academic understanding of the research topic, semi-structured themed interviews were chosen as a research method. Interviews are particularly good in investigating the perspectives and opinions of individuals (Ojasalo et al. 2014, 106). As I was interested in understanding how the managers in the studied companies think about sales skills, interviews were an appropriate method to choose. It was important that all participants were asked the same questions to make the answers comparable. But it was also important to leave room for follow-up questions, clarifications, and any unprompted answers during the interviews. For these reasons semi-structured themed interviews was selected as the interview method.

16 people from 15 companies were interviewed for the research. The interviews took place between February and May 2020. The interviews were conducted over the phone. They lasted between half an hour to an hour depending on the interviewee. At the start of the interview, it was explained that all the answers will be anonymized, the interviews are recorded and that the recordings will only be available to the researcher and the ROBINS research project. Only after the interviewee had indicated on record that these conditions were acceptable, the interview started. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim except for one, as the recording device malfunctioned during the interview. For this one interview, the results are based on notes that were taken during the interview.

The interview questions were:

1. Background: Name, title, career background before working the current company
2. What is the meaning of digital transformation to you?
3. What does it mean to your company and to your salesforce?
4. What are the most relevant activities in digital transformation in your company in the field of sales and marketing?
5. Who drives the digital change in your company?
6. How is the digital transformation process lead in your sales and marketing organizations?
7. In your opinion, what are the aspects that companies should pay close attention to when they lead digital transformation in sales and marketing?
8. To get the best employees in the future for sales and marketing, what are the skills needed?

As can be seen, the questions include mainly topics other than sales skills. There is only one question relating specifically to skills. This is because the interviews were conducted as part of the ROBINS research project which had set the interview questions. The interviews were used to gather data about digital transformation for the project and the data has been and will be used for research publications related to digital transformations of B2B sales. It was impossible to cover and analyze all the interview data for this thesis and that is why I decided to focus only on the question of sales skills.

## 2.3 Case companies

15 companies were selected for the research. The companies were based on these criteria: they should be Finnish companies from ICT and manufacturing sectors and that they should represent a wide range of company sizes. I contacted 47 suitable companies and people through e-mail and Linkedin until I had 15 companies that matched the set criteria. The companies and their interviewees are anonymized but table 1 shows general information about the companies.

Table 1. Company information of interviewees.

| Company turnover € | Number of personnel | Business area | Interviewee position |
|---|---|---|---|
| 150M | 55 | ICT | CEO |
| 16M | 57 | ICT | CEO |
| 11M | 65 | ICT | CEO |
| 14M | 224 | ICT | CEO |
| 25M | 175 | ICT | CEO |
| 44M | 430 | ICT | Chief Sales Officer |
| 17M | 66 | Manufacturing | CEO |
| 74M | 183 | Manufacturing | Chief Digital Officer |
| 353M | 547 | Manufacturing | 2 people: Marketing manager and communications manager |
| 137M | 137 | Manufacturing | CEO |
| 1M | 87 | Manufacturing | CEO |
| 11M | 67 | Manufacturing | CEO |
| 9M | 48 | Manufacturing | CEO |
| 8M | 86 | ICT | CEO |
| 104M | 403 | Manufacturing | Vice President, Commercial |

Turnover was retrieved from the most recent financial statement that was publicly available at the time of the interview and have been rounded up or down to the closest million. Personnel numbers are also those that were reported at the time of the interview.

# 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The two main concepts this thesis focuses on are digital transformation and sales skills. Within these two themes I will explore research into digital transformation, sales technology, sales skills, and digital skills frameworks. This section does not address the ways in which companies transform themselves digitally nor have I included sales management and leadership in the contextual discussion. Academic literature has dealt with both of those topics extensively. That is why this thesis focuses on the individual sales representative level to look at the skills needed in the digitally transforming companies.

## 3.1 Digital transformation

There are as many definitions of digital transformation as there are writers of the topic. Often quoted definition comes from the consultancy firm Salesforce: “the process of using digital technologies to create new—or modify existing—business processes, culture, and customer experiences to meet changing business and market requirements “(Salesforce, n.d.). What is noteworthy about this quote is that technologies are not seen as tools to support everyday work; they are meant to change larger entities – culture, business processes, customer experiences – to respond to the changing environment surrounding companies. Similarly, Venkatraman notes that digital technologies are not merely supporting tools; they are tools that shape companies’ business models (Venkatraman, 2017, 9). A narrower definition is provided by Singh, Flaherty, Sohi, Deeter-Schmelz, Habel, Le Meunier-FitzHugh, Malshe, Mullins & Onyemah: “application of digitization and AI technologies to company assets as a means to improve competencies and rethink the value proposition of the firm” (Singh et al. 2019, 5). These

quotes demonstrate the different ways in which digital transformation can be understood. In the broadest meaning of the term, digital transformation is talks about changing various aspects of companies' structures, even changing their DNA. On the narrower spectrum, it is about rethinking company's value proposition.

What all these terms have in common is the idea that digital transformation is not about tools but about developing the business technologically in a way that it continues to compete, if not even overrun competitors, in the markets. There seems to be little disagreement among researchers whether companies should digitally transform. Transforming digitally is seen as survival:

> Why respond to digital disruption? Put simply, the emergence of new classes of technologies, such as social media, mobile technologies, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, blockchain, additive manufacturing, autonomous vehicles, and augmented and virtual reality, change what is possible for business. Leaders who want to maintain advantage, discover new opportunities, and better serve their customers will leverage the opportunities provided by these technologies to do business differently (Kane, Phillips, Copulsky, & Andrus, 2019, 18)

Interestingly, only one of the definitions above specifically mentioned competencies. Digital transformation seems to be something abstract: business processes, markets, and opportunities. But the skills that are required to bring about those changes are invisible in the definitions.

### 3.1.1 Levels of digitally transformed companies

There have been some attempts to categorize companies based on their overall level of digital transformation or the level of sales digital transformation. Research into how to drive digital communication in companies are more common but research into how to drive it in sales is limited. Here I will expand on two different studies that have attempted to categorize companies in terms of their level of

digital transformation. The first focuses on the overall company level and the second is specifically about digital sales transformation. Both have identified those companies that are far ahead and far behind as well as the average performers. There are also researchers who have not focused on the definition itself, rather they have attempted to define and classify digitally transformed companies.

Westerman, Bonnet and McAffee (2014) looked at the use of digital technologies in 391 companies in 30 countries. Based on their analyses the authors divided companies into four levels depending on how digital and how well lead the companies were. The four levels were: beginners, fashionistas, conservatives, and digital masters. Beginners used digital technologies very little and lacked the courage, vision, or leadership to drive the change. Fashionistas integrated technological solutions but lacked the leadership to put them into good use. Conservatives might have had the leadership capabilities but were cautious about adopting technologies. Finally, digital masters were good at adopting the right technologies for their business and had the necessary leadership to drive the change. (Westerman et al. 2014, 15-17). Unsurprisingly the authors found that digital masters far outperformed their competitors. Digital masters were “26 percent more profitable than their average industry competitors. They generate 9 percent more revenue…and drive more efficiency in their existing products and processes” (Westerman et al. 2014, 4). Most interestingly for this thesis, the authors noted that digital masters invested in building people’s digital skills:

> 82% are building the digital skills they need to support their digital transformation… the masters had greater digital skills than non-masters, reporting 31% higher social media skills, 38% higher mobile skills, and 19 % higher analytics skills (Westerman et al. 2014, 163).

Acquiring these skills seems to rest on the shoulders of the leadership as the authors suggest five different ways in which companies – not individuals – can get the skills: hire, train, partner, acquire or incubate (Westerman et al., 2014, 227). None of these options provide advice for individuals on how to level up their own digital skills.

Guenzi & Habel (2020) have a similar categorization in terms of companies' approaches to digital sales transformation. They divided companies into four clusters. The first cluster was digital sales transformation leaders. Companies in this category have transformed their sales digitally and they hold digital transformation in great importance. They have digitalized their services as well as their sales processes. They have also dedicated a specific unit to own digital transformation of sales to make sure it is lead and developed further. The second cluster digital sales transformation laggards. Unsurprisingly companies in this category have not managed transform their sales digitally. They underperform in everything from strategic vision to digital offerings. They have mainly digitalized the preselling and after-sales phases of the sales process for a small number of customers. They also do not usually have a dedicated unit to oversee the transformation process. Digital sales enablers in cluster 3 and digital sales replacers in cluster 4 sit in between leaders and laggards. Digital transformation of sales is extremely important for digital sales enablers. They have focused on digitalizing both their services and all their selling processes for all their customers. But they do not necessarily have a specific unit to oversee the digital transformation of sales processes. Despite these efforts their sales growth is below average, and they are not as good managing the transformation as leaders are. Digital sales replacers do see the importance of the digital transformation of sales but not as

strongly as enablers. They have mainly digitalized sales processes for the least attractive, existing, and new customers. They also sit in the middle in terms of how well they have managed of the digital transformation of sales. (Guenzi & Habel, 2020, 75-77).

Westerman et al (2014) and Guenzi & Habel (2020) have a lot in common. They all see the top performers – digital masters and digital leaders – constituting the smallest number of companies. Most companies tend to fall in the other three categories. They all also identify leadership skills as one of the reasons behind this. Good leadership is required to succeed in digital transformation. Finally, all of them also have advice for managers on how to go about leading digital transformation. But none of them offer advice to non-management level people who to develop their own skills regardless of management.

This lack of skills as one of the reasons why companies have not yet embraced digital transformation have not been missed by other researchers. Venkatraman argues that part of the problem is that companies hire skills they need now and not for the digital future. They also do not train their current staff for digital skills. (Venkatraman, 2017, 9). Yet, there are companies who have invested in their current workforce. For example, AT&T realized that almost half of its workforce was in functions that would most likely cease to exist because of digital technologies. In 2014 the company started re-training 100,000 employees to better match the digital future. They “spend a billion dollars on a web-based multi-layer effort that includes partnerships with universities and online course providers as well as new internal capabilities for career development for the future” (Saldanha, 2019, 123-124).

All these pieces of research have one thing in common: they focus on the company level transformation. They do not elaborate on what digital transformation means from the employee perspective in terms of skills and attributes. If anything, they focus on the management level.

### 3.2 Sales skills

Researchers as well as companies have long been interested in what makes a good sales representative. Therefore, there is no shortage of research into the characteristics and skills of effective sales reps. Here I will only focus on research that has looked at the issue from the perspective of modern technology and changing digital landscape.

Digital tools have changed the sales profession in a significant way in a relatively quick time. Technology changes how salespeople work (Cuevas, 2018, 199), internet has taken away salespeople's role as **the** source of information for customers (Rackham & de Vincentis, 1999); ICT systems hold all the customer information that used to be salespersons' assets (Maklan & Knox, 2009) and social media as well as data analytics tools provide insights about customers; insights which used to be a core job of the salesperson (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd & Lee, 2012). With all these changes, it is expected that the skills salespeople need and the ways in which they work need to adapt. What kind of skills are necessary in this kind of environment?

Mark Roberge built a hiring formula in Hubspot and came up with 5 characteristics of a good salesperson. They are: coachability, curiosity, prior success, intelligence, and work ethic (Roberge, 2015, 12–21). The list is short and simple, but all those terms contain many different skills. For example, for Roberge curiosity means all these things: asking questions without sounding interrogative, listening intently, educating through thought-provoking questions, quickly building trust, understanding customer goals, aspirations, fears, and struggles. (Roberge, 2015, 16). Similarly, intelligence for Roberge means “the ability to learn complex concepts quickly and communicate those concepts in an easy-to-understand manner” (Roberge, 2015, 20). It could be argued that learning quickly and communicating in an easy-to-understand manner are two different skills.

Another typology of successful salespeople is the famous challenger sale concept by Dixon and Adamson (2011). In their research they divided sales representatives into five types: hard workers, relationship builders, the lone wolves, the reactive problem solvers, and the challengers. The challengers excelled all other types in selling. The researchers tested 44 attributes and of those they found six characteristics that were the most significant in defining someone as a challenger sales rep: capable of unique perspectives, a strong communicator, understands customers’ value and economic drivers, comfortable discussing money and can pressure the customer. (Dixon & Adamson, 2011, 23). The reason why the combination of these characteristics came to be called the challenger seller is because with these characteristics sales reps can challenge the customers to think differently and change their way of doing business. The authors argue that the ability to challenge a customer is what is key to salespeople’s success (Dixon & Adamson, 2011, 29).

Richardson (2014) also believes in challenging customers. She calls it giving clients insights beyond what they already know. According to Richardson, salesperson must be performance ready, industry ready and company and stakeholder ready. These four aspects contain these skills: having knowledge about different industries, having knowledge about prospective companies and their stakeholders, understanding clients' worlds, being part of clients' networks, and solving clients' business challenges. When a sales representatives have these skills, they will be able to provide clients with insights, which – in her view – is the key to sales representatives' success. (Richardson, 2014, 19-23).

Kane et al (2019) have listed five skills that, based on their research, are the most crucial skills for employees to have to succeed in a digital workplace. Those skills are: a change-oriented perspective, technological literacy/understanding, strategic thinking, interpersonal skills and – rather unhelpfully – miscellaneous. The authors noted that a change-oriented perspective is the most important skill of the five as other skills can become outdated fast. (Kane et al, 2019, 112-113).

Cuevas (2018) has also provided a set of competencies that is required in the future sales role. He has divided the competencies into four categories: functional, relational, managerial, and cognitive. Functional competencies include customer management and customer value skills. These competencies are: financial insight, business acumen, marketing knowledge, business opportunity discovery and qualification, strategic negotiation, market and research and customer insight. Relational competences refer mainly to the ability to interact and

connect with individuals. These competencies are: multi-level and multi-functional relationships, understanding human dynamics, ability to contribute and work in teams, ability to integrate marketing-sales efforts, ability to inspire trust, listening skills and political awareness. Managerial competences include a general administrative skill as well as people management skills. These competencies are: people management skills, high ethical and integrity standards, influencing skills, openness to change and adaptability, and clarity of communication. Finally, cognitive competences are mainly analytical skills: innovative problem solving, task prioritization, lateral thinking and mental toughness and resilience. (Cuevas, 2018, 204).

Similarly, Schultz and Doerr (2014) have listed key attributes and qualities of an insight seller. The attributes include: passion for working and selling, conceptual thinking, curiosity, sense of urgency, assertiveness, money orientation and performance orientation. The qualities include: gravitas, business acumen, perseverance, integrity, and emotional intelligence. (Schultz & Doerr, 2014, 156-157).

What is noteworthy about all these characterizations of effective sellers is that technical understanding as a skill is mentioned only once, by Kane (2019). All other aforementioned skills describe either interpersonal skills, psychological and behavioral attributes, business skills or something similar. It is difficult to say why this is. To find out would require looking into the research methods to understand possible reasons behind the results.

Despite all the research into what makes an effective sales representative, Pettijohn, Pettijohn & Taylor (2007) have noted that it is very difficult to academically

show a link between sales skills and performance. In their research they found that even sales representatives' perceptions about the importance of traditional sales skills (for example, prospecting, presenting, negotiating, closing) are positively related to good sales outcomes. Essentially this means that if you think that traditional sales skills are important, you are more likely also to attribute a good outcome to those skills. The researchers suggest that sales managers should make sure that that their sales representatives hone their traditional sales skills. (Pettijohn, Pettijohn & Taylor, 2007, 84).

What is important to note about these studies is that none of them have specifically looked at what are the skills needed from salespeople as companies digitally transform themselves. Mostly the research has focused on looking at what makes an effective seller here and now, regardless how digital the company is. On the contrary, there is plenty of research into what are the skills and attributes needed from management in digital transformation (see for example Schiuma, Schettini, & Santarsiero, 2021; Westerman, Bonnet and McAffee, 2014; Daly, 2017) and what leaders must do to drive the transformation (see for example Gupta, 2018; Kane et al, 2019; Mattila, Yrjölä, Hautamäki, 2021; Mattila, Hautamäki, Yrjölä, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2020).

### 3.2.1 Sales and technology

The increased use of technologies and their availability has made researchers to analyze the impact of the new technologies on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of salespeople. Research has revealed a plethora of ways in which digital technologies can aid the sales profession. Technology has resulted in improved efficiency, faster processes, deeper knowledge about markets and customers

(Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, & Mathieu, 2008), eradication of mundane tasks, freeing time for customer interactions (Baker & Delpechitre, 2013), better prospecting and lead generation (Syam & Sharma, 2018), and increased revenues, better profitability as well as better understanding of the customers' needs (Ahearne & Rapp 2010; Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016). There is also evidence to show that by using digital technologies companies increase revenue as well as improve profitability, effectiveness and understanding of the customers' needs (Ahearne & Rapp 2010; Rodriguez et al. 2016). Hunter & Panagopoulos even go so far as to argue that B2B sales cannot be done without sales technology (Hunter & Panagopoulos, 2015, 162).

It should be clear that technology has helped the sale profession. But it has been speculated that the greatest impact yet to come will be in customer understanding and customizable offerings. Syam & Sharma (2018, 145) have predicted that technology will even facilitate decision-making or act as a decision-maker together with the salesperson. Ultimately, digital technologies will not only disrupt sales practices (Singh et al., 2019) but make salespeople work side by side with the new technologies (Syam & Sharma 2018, 135–136). Richardson calls this change ”revolutionized selling” (Richardson, 2014, 35)

These hopes for technology use are put into a dark light by academic research and research by consulting firms who have found that salespeople are not good at implementing and using sales technologies, not even CRMs (see for example, Homburg, Wieseke & Kuehnl, 2009). Accenture have noted this lack of technology use on various occasions in recent years. For example, in 2016 the consulting firm noted that “75% of sales executives said that sales tools today are an

integral part of the sales process, only 15% described their sales tools as truly effective" (quoted in Guenzi & Habel, 2020, 57)

But it is not entirely clear to what extent technological skills are necessary for salespeople. Singh et al. (2019, 16) speculate that soft-selling skills might be more important than hard-selling skills. Cuevas agrees. He argues that sales roles will move from hard tactics to a more understanding and collaborative sales method. However, this does not mean that the there is no room for the traditional sales skills. (Cuevas, 2018). He believes that "a set of 'traditional' skills will still be relevant in the future" (Cuevas, 2018, 203).

Whilst technology has been predicted to bring about vast changes to how sales is done, there seems to be a consensus that the purpose of sales – helping customers achieve their goals – does not change (Paschen, Wilson, & Ferreira, 2020, 412). In fact, being there for the customer is more important than ever. Daly even argues that for companies to get recurring business in the digitally transformed world, salespeople must be "always on, always connected, on-demand, in service of the customer, reliable and secure" (Daly, 2018, 8).

### 3.3 Digital skill framework

There is distinct lack of frameworks for sales skills in academic literature. As shown earlier in this section, literature has mainly focused on listing, compiling and typologizing different skills. But merely listing skills needed to succeed only results in a daunting list that is a mishmash of traditional sales skills, technical skills, interpersonal skills, attributes, and behaviors.

What is needed is a framework that combines these skills into a manageable set that will help both sales representatives and managers to understand what they need to focus on. Whilst there is not one directly available from sales literature, van Laar, van Deursen, van Dijk, & Haan (2017) provide one from computer science. The researchers analyzed what they called 21st century skills and digital skills through a systematic literature review. Based on the results they came up with a framework for 21st century digital skills for knowledge workers. This framework is shown in a summarized form in table 2 on page 27.

The framework is divided into seven core skills and five conceptual skills. Core skills are: technical, information management, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. Fundamental skills are: ethical awareness, cultural awareness, flexibility, self-direction, and lifelong learning. In addition to the definitions given in the table, every skill has at least one key component summarized as such:

- Technical: understanding technology; operating basic applications and access resources for everyday use; avoid losing orientation when navigating online.
- Information management: using technology to search for, find, retrieve, and organize information; to judge the usefulness and sufficiency of information.
- Communication: using technology to communicate information and ideas effectively through media and online formats.
- Collaboration: using technologies to generate meaning and to share ideas.
- Creativity: using technology to generate ideas or develop new ways of doing things.

- Critical thinking: using technology to ask and answer questions related to a problem, judge the suitability of a source for a given problem, evaluating information's consistency with other information; using technology to link facts and ideas and suggest new ideas for discussion.
- Problem-solving: using technology to acquire knowledge about a problem and applying knowledge to solve the problem.
- Ethical awareness: understanding the legal, ethical, and cultural limits of using technology; understanding potential risks that exist on the Internet when using technology; understanding the impact of technology in social, economic, and cultural contexts.
- Cultural awareness: having an appropriate attitude towards online communication and being able to collaborate with people from different cultures when using ICT.
- Flexibility: modifying one's thinking, attitudes, or behaviors to be better suited to current or future environments
- Self-direction: setting goals when using technology; willingness to take control of their own learning when using technology; proactively taking steps toward decisions and/or actions when using technology; assessing whether previously set goals have been met when using technology.
- Lifelong learning: using technology to create useful knowledge. (van Laar et al, 2017, 583).

As it can be seen, the framework does not only contain skills but also knowledge, attitudes, and even personality traits. This, according to the authors, is purposeful. For them, skills need knowledge and attitudes so that they can all be used to succeed in the workforce. Furthermore, not every skill on their framework has a

digital aspect. Again, this is also purposeful as the authors believe that not all skills necessary in the 21st century must be based on digital technologies. (van Laar et al, 2017, 582). Despite this, there is no unnecessary skills on their framework. The authors see core skills as essential for knowledge workers in different occupations and conceptual skills support core skills in the sense that conceptual skills are needed to utilize core skills. They argue that these skills determine how successful companies and employees will be in the rapidly digitalizing societies. (van Laar et al 2017, 582). It is noteworthy that is not merely another list of skills put in a table format. The authors say that their vision is “to put employees in charge of their own learning. The essence is what employees can do with knowledge to support 21st-century skills and take full advantage of ICT” (van Laar et al, 2017, 584). This goal of letting employees take control of their own learning is the reason why this framework was chosen as the basis for the digital skill map developed later in this thesis.

Table 2. Framework for 21st-century digital skills. Summarized from van Laar et al., 2017, 583.

| Core skills and definition | | Contextual skills and definitions | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technical | Use digital tools to accomplish practical tasks and to navigate online environments. | Ethical awareness | Behave in a socially responsible way. Awareness and knowledge of legal and ethical aspects of digital technologies |
| Information management | Use technology to search, select, organize information for decision-making. | Cultural awareness | Understand and respect other cultures when using digital technologies. |
| Communication | Transmit information to others in an effective manner. | Flexibility | Adapt thinking, attitude, or behavior to changing environments. |
| Collaboration | Use technology to develop a social network and work in a team towards achieving a common goal. | Self-direction | Set goals for yourself and work toward reaching them. |
| Creativity | Use of technology to generate new ideas or treat familiar ideas in a new way. Transform ideas into a product, service, or process. | Lifelong learning | Ability to explore new opportunities with technologies and learning from them. |
| Critical thinking | Use technology to make informed judgements and choices. Communicate using reflective reasoning and sufficient evidence. | | |
| Problem solving | Use technology to cognitively process and understand a problem. Active use of knowledge to find a solution. | | |

# 4 ANALYSIS

The interview answers from the 15 interviews conducted for this master's thesis were analyzed with van Laar et al. (2017) framework for 21st-century digital skills. First the answers were coded based on the core and contextual skill categories. However, this quickly demonstrated that the framework is not directly applicable to the context of sales skills. In this section I will discuss those aspects that are not directly applicable and highlight the skills that were mentioned most often by the interviewees.

## 4.1 Digital sales skill framework

Based on the interviews, van Laar et al.'s (2017) framework for 21st century digital skills were modified to represent **a digital sales skill framework** (table 3). Some of the original skill categories have been modified as well as the definitions for those categories. The third column collates interviewees answers about the skills they thought are important for salespeople. I will analyze the answers and explain the reasons behind the modifications to the original framework in this section.

Table 3. Digital sales skill framework, modified from van Laar et al (2017)

| Skill category | Definition | Skills |
|---|---|---|
| **Basic sales skills** | The skills to transmit information effectively to others, to cognitively process and understand a problem and actively use knowledge to find a solution to a problem. | • Ability to work and look in the long term to ensure sufficient pipeline<br>• Enjoy argumentation<br>• Ability to convinve<br>• Know how to listen and read customers<br>• Ability to find customers pain points<br>• Social and networking skills<br>• Ability to present and convince quickly |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | • Ability to sell to different people and indifferent situations<br>• Emotional intelligence<br>• Ability to build relationships both face-to-face and digitally<br>• Interaction skills<br>• Helping clients<br>• Ability to be compassionate<br>• Communication skills |
| **Technical and information management** | The skills to use digital technologies and tools to accomplish practical tasks and efficiently search, select, and organize information to make informed decisions. | • Utilizing digital channels<br>• Analytical data skills<br>• Ability to be data driven<br>• Ability to use different systems, software and platforms<br>• Control and hold more touchpoints with clients<br>• Ability to scale a good customer experience across different channels<br>• Ability to search information through different channels |
| **Knowledge** | The skills to use and develop knowledge about products, solutions and customers' lives and to adapt that knowledge in changing customer and industry environments. | • Know clients' terminology<br>• Knowledge of industry, products, solutions, clients<br>• Ability to fit products and solutions to clients pain points |
| **Lifelong learning** | The skills to constantly explore new opportunities when using digital tools that can be integrated into an environment to continually improve one's capabilities. | • Ability to be awake about what is happening<br>• Willingness to learn new things<br>• Following the world and trends<br>• Ability to renew oneself with the changing world and trends<br>• Ability to learn |
| **Collaboration** | The skills to use digital technologies to develop a social network, work in a team to exchange information, negotiate agreements, and make decisions with mutual respect for each other. | • Team work<br>• Ability to cooperate |
| **Creativity** | The skills to use to generate new or previously unknown | • Making buying easier<br>• Willingness to try new things<br>• Content creation |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | ideas, treat familiar ideas in a new way and transform such ideas into a product, service or process. | |
| **Critical thinking** | The skills to make informed judgements and choices about obtained information and communicate using reflective reasoning and sufficient evidence. | • Situational intelligence |
| **Ethical & cultural awareness** | To behave in a socially responsible way, show awareness and knowledge of legal and ethical aspects, and cultural understanding and respect other cultures. | • Following legal developments<br>• Understanding different cultures and taking them into consideration when working with different people |
| **Flexibility** | The skills to adapt one's thinking, attitude, or behavior to changing technological environments. | • Ability to modify own skills and know-how |

### 4.2 Basic sales skills

Basic sales skills were the most often given answer when asked what the relevant skills are in a digitalized sales environment. But this is a vague concept that could encompass a plethora of different skills. This, in fact, turned out to be true. As interviewees were asked to elaborate on what the basic sales skills mean for them, the answers included everything from communication skills to knowledge and problem-solving and self-direction. One interviewee provided this succinct definition for basic sales skills:

*“The ability to convince a client face-to-face and make your product or solution fit the client’s problem or help the client identify their pain points”* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

This quote demonstrates that basic sales skills contain communication skills and problem-solving skills. These two skills were also mentioned several times in the academic research. Communication skills were identified as attributes of a successful seller by Roberge (2015), Dixon & Adamson (2011), and Kane et al (2019). Problem-solving was not directly mentioned in the research discussion in the previous section. But it comes up indirectly through customer understanding, which was mentioned by Richardson (2014), Dixon & Adamson (2011) and Cuevas (2018). The point about customer understanding is to help customers with their problems. To successfully help them, one needs good communication skills.

Another basic sales skill was self-direction as exemplified by this quote:

*“The ability to work and look in the long term to ensure that there is enough pipeline beyond this week and month”* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

The more the answers were analyzed, the clearer it became that communication skills, problem-solving skills and self-direction cannot be separated from one another. Therefore, in the updated framework communication, problem-solving and self-direction skills were conflated to create a core skill category of basic sales skills.

The fact that basic selling skills were the most often mentioned skills by the interviewees, seems to support the finding by Cuevas (2018) that traditional sales skills will not disappear. Quite contrary, they will continue to play an important role.

### 4.3 Technological and information management skills

Here it was also necessary to integrate two skill categories as the interviewees mentioned data and analytical skills together with digital tools. Salespeople use different tools and technologies for prospecting and advancing the sales process, so it made sense to put technological and information management skills into one skill category.

Technological/digital skills were often seen by the interviewees as necessary skills for salespeople to have. However, the answers lacked details about what those skills mean. Here are some examples from the interviews:

*"No matter how good sales or marketing expert you are, you will not survive without digital skills"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

*"Understanding digital tools and seeing and finding their potential is a basic expectation"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

*"Understanding digi and how your own work will change… If your working methods are from the 80s, you will fall off the wagon"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

Digital tools are clearly important but what those digital skills are or contain was left vague in these answers. However, there were some interviewees that mentioned specific tasks that they expected salespeople to do with digital tools: using digital channels, generate leads, meeting more clients than competitors and analyzing data from different sources to utilize in sales work.

There was, however, one interviewee who had an opposing view:

> *"We don't sell anything online and never will. At least I don't see it. We are not involved in that kind of projects. We work with big projects which require a lot of cooperation and evaluation from clients. We are not the type of service provider; we don't have this buy-from-the-web -type. Of course, we use our channels to display our technical know-how"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

In needs to be noted that this quote does not necessarily demonstrate resistance to change. It is possible that this quote reflects the CEO's understanding of their customer behavior. It is plausible that there are differences between companies and industries in their adoption of digital tool based on how their customers generally buy.

Several interviewees also brought up the challenges they have had getting salespeople to use digital tools.

> *"It is a big challenge to get sale reps to start using digital tools. It requires a lot of stick to get a sales rep to update the CRM. I have wondered it is not even possible to have a systematic method of working and a skillful sales rep in one person. Is it impossible? Is that why it is so difficult? We are active on social media and the use of those platforms by our sales reps is also pretty basic* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

> *"I meet people who don't know the touch-typing system and it makes everything incredible difficult. Everything is done with computers nowadays. If you can't type, it is unbelievable. It is almost the same as being partly on life-support. I know this is a silly example, but I have had problems with this sometimes. Some people get*

> *the tools really well and use them and then some others just don't change their ways of working at all"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

I have included these specific examples here as it was discovered in the theoretical framework that salespeople not using digital tools was a common problem (Homburg et al., 2009; Guenzi & Habel, 2020).

As it was noted in the previous section, analyses of successful sellers have not included technical skills as part of the seller skill set. However, here digital skills are brought up frequently. One should not read too much into this. This can be explained by the fact that the interview specifically asked about digital skills in the context of digital transformation, so it is natural that the answers reflect that. Furthermore, majority of the interview was spent on talking about the situation in the interviewees' companies, so it is possible it would have felt hard for an interviewee to deny the importance of digital skills. It might be the case that if the interview had focused on sales skills without the context of digital transformation, answers would have differed. However, this is purely speculative and not supported by research.

### 4.4 Knowledge

Knowledge is not one the categories in the digital skill framework on page 27, but, once again, it was so often mentioned by the interviewees that it needed to be a category of its own. Furthermore, knowledge and intelligence were also identified by research as among the important skills for salespeople to have (Roberge, 2015; Richarson, 2014).

Here are some answers from the interviewees to demonstrate the importance of knowledge:

*"[They need to have] deep knowledge of their industry and even the science behind their product"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

Understanding science behind products is not necessarily a skill that is required of every salesperson everywhere. But in this company the product and its development are based on science that requires doctoral level understanding to explain the products to clients.

Deep knowledge also come across in this answer:

*"Deep knowledge about your product, solutions, clients' day-to-day lives"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

In addition to using knowledge to refer to products and services, it was also used in relation to understanding customer needs.

> *"The first thing is always to understand customer needs. It can also be another way around; being able to tell a bit more and help the client with the bigger picture. So that when a client comes to you to buy a nail you can sell them the nails plus an entire storage solution"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

One CEO also combined knowledge and creativity:

> *"T-shaped people will become important: to have something that you are an expert in and then you also have a more cursory know-how on several things. In sales, you will be able to move on a wider field and those sales reps will be able to bring in better results than the ones that are experts in one specific thing…Wider field means instead of just being able to talk about your products and services*

> *and fit those for the customers' needs, you are also able to look further, for example what kind of content might be interesting for the clients. Maybe be able to produce some content yourself"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

This quote not only demonstrates the levels of knowledge that is required of the salesperson, but it also demonstrates an expectation for creativity in the form of content production.

Based on these answers, the following definition of the knowledge category for the digital sales skill framework was created: *The skills to use and develop knowledge about products, solutions, and customers' lives. The skill to adapt that knowledge in changing customer and industry environments.*

### 4.5 Lifelong learning

The final skill that interviewees raised often was learning. Several interviewees even used the term lifelong learning. This is perhaps not surprising as salespeople work in environments that change quickly so they need to constantly learn new things to survive. Here are some interview quotes that demonstrate the point:

*"Continuous learning: being constantly awake about what is happening and searching for information through different channels"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

*"Open mind, positive attitude and willingness to learn new things and try new opportunities"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

> *"Continuous learning is of course important. Sales environment is changing fast and will be so in the future. Leaning on routines does not bring good results. You must be ready to modify your own skills and ways of selling in order to succeed in the digital environment"* (CEO, translated from interview transcription).

Interestingly, learning was directly mentioned as an important skill in the academic review in the previous section. However, it was indirectly mentioned through other terms. For example, Roberge's (2015) coachability is clearly about learning; it is about getting better at what you do with the help of a coach. It could also be argued that curiosity as a skill (Roberge, 2015; Schultz & Doerr, 2014) is also an important aspect of learning.

### 4.6 Other skills

Interviewees mentioned all the other skills listed on the digital skill framework on pages 28–30. However, they were usually mentioned only once so they did not merit further analysis. But another two categories were integrated for the digital sales skill framework: ethical and cultural understanding. In the original definition by van Laar et al. (2017, 583) these two categories included being socially responsible, being aware of ethical and legal matters and respecting other cultures. These two categories are close enough together in terms of their meaning, I decided to combine the two categories in the final framework.

# 5 RESULTS

Based on academic literature and empirical research this master's thesis produces a digital sales skill map for the use of sales representatives. The general structure of the skill map is based on a skill map that is in use in Advance B2B, a company where I work. The company uses it as tool to map the employees' skills and to draw up learning paths for developing their skills. The skill map has been modified for the purposes of this thesis. The two parts of the map are presented in the appendices. This section explains how to use the map.

### 5.1.1 Digital sales skill map

The map consists of two different parts. The first part is the scorecard (appendix 1 on page 47). The scorecard gives every skill category a definition. Then the table has been divided into scores between 1–5, 1 standing for satisfactory and 5 for excellent. There is a section for every score where a sales representative can fill the requirements to achieve that grade. The grade definitions have been left empty on purpose. This is because the skill requirements can vary greatly between companies. This way a sales representative can together with his manager or company decide what the required skills and achievements are for each grade category. Once the different requirements are in place, a sales representative can grade himself on the scorecard for each skill category. Then those skills should be transferred to the second part of the model, the skill map (appendix 2 on page 48). As the grades are entered on the map, the map changes to reflect the skills of the sales representative. When the skill map is done in a spreadsheet software, the map can be built so that every time a grade is changed, the map itself changes. That way a sales representative can see

which skills he needs to improve in relation to the other skills. It can also be determined what shape the skill map should take, which would help to determine what skills should be weighed more. It might also be that a grade 5 is not necessary to achieve in every skill category. The map can show which skills can be left at a lower level if deemed necessary based on the goals of the sales organization and the company. Any salesperson can use the map to assess their own skills. It can also be used together with sales teams and managers to assess the skills needed among the sales staff or used as a basis for skills training.

# 6 CONCLUSION

This master's thesis aimed to understand what are the skills needed from salespeople in digitally transforming companies. Digital transformation was discussed in terms of its definition as well as what different levels of digital transformation there are. This discussion formed the basis for exploring what digital transformation means for sales organizations. It was found that digital transformation has brought a vast number of tools to salespeople's arsenal, which can help them to work more efficiently and faster, gain deeper knowledge about markets and customers, spend more time with customers, as well as prospect and generate leads better. Thus, there were several benefits identified. But these tools had also significantly impacted how the work is done. Some of the work and roles sales representatives had played before – such as the role as **the** source of information on clients – have been replaced by technology. Research also suggested that technology will continue to disrupt sales practices, to the extent that technology starts working together with salespeople and even make decisions together with them. Finally, review of the research also revealed that despite these technological changes, core parts of the sales work will not change.

The findings from the interviews suggest that salespeople will continue to need traditional sales skills even in companies that are transforming or have already transformed digitally. Interviewees believed that salespeople's ability to communicate and convince and solve problems for their clients are skills whose importance does not disappear. Interviewees also identified many of the same skills that academic research had previously identified as important skills to have. So, the empirical research corroborates some of the academic research.

As a result of the empirical research and academic literature review, a digital sales skill framework was created. The framework itself was modified from van Laar et al. (2017) and deviated from the original version in some skills and skill categories. This master's thesis identified some different skills that were seen as important for salespeople to have. The skills were: basic sales skills, technical & information management skills, knowledge, lifelong learning, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, ethical & cultural awareness, and flexibility. Based on the digital sales skill framework, a skill map was created for sales representatives use. The map allows salespeople to evaluate themselves in terms of the different skill categories and see which skills they need focus on. The map can also be used together with sales management by creating requirements for each grade and using it as basis to evaluate what skills sales staff need to work on to progress to the next grades.

The main learning from this research is that even in digitally transforming companies, it is likely that salespeople will continue to need basic sales skills. But they must learn to use those skills through digital tools and technologies. This way, technologies can be seen as the ground on which salespeople have to stand on to utlize their other skills.

### 6.1.1 Limitations of research

Most of the research interviews were carried out some weeks before the COVID pandemic disturbed the world. The last four interviews were carried out when the pandemic had already shut down the world and forced companies to hurriedly implement technologies they had not needed before. This could have impacted the views of the last interviewees as they saw the effect the pandemic was having

on their work. Therefore, it is possible that answers by the interviewees before COVID are different than those during it. Their answers might not be entirely comparable.

It is also possible that interviewees answers were influenced by the framing of the interview topic. They were asked about sales skills in relation to digital transformation, so it is only natural that digital skills were mentioned so often in the answers. Whether this accurately reflects their views about sales skills in digitally transforming companies is impossible to say. As also stated earlier there was only one question about skills in the set of interview questions. That does not give a deep enough understanding about how the managers think about digital sales skills.

### 6.1.2 Future research

As stated earlier, a follow-up study on the impact of COVID would help to establish what kind of measures companies have taken to digitalize their business and whether their views about skills have changed. Further research should also validate the map developed in this research and provide a roadmap for companies to develop their competencies to the directions they want to go. Finally, it would be important to study the views of salespeople themselves. As already mentioned in the theoretical framework section, there is plenty of research done about what digital transformation requires of managers and companies and what skills managers view are needed. The voice of salespeople themselves needs to be also heard in academic research.

To improve the research in this thesis, a similar study should be conducted with more than one interview question on skills. One questions does not give a deep enough understanding of the skills nor their meaning. To achieve a better understanding, a study using different research methods together semi-structured interviews would give a broader perspective and deeper understanding of the matter.

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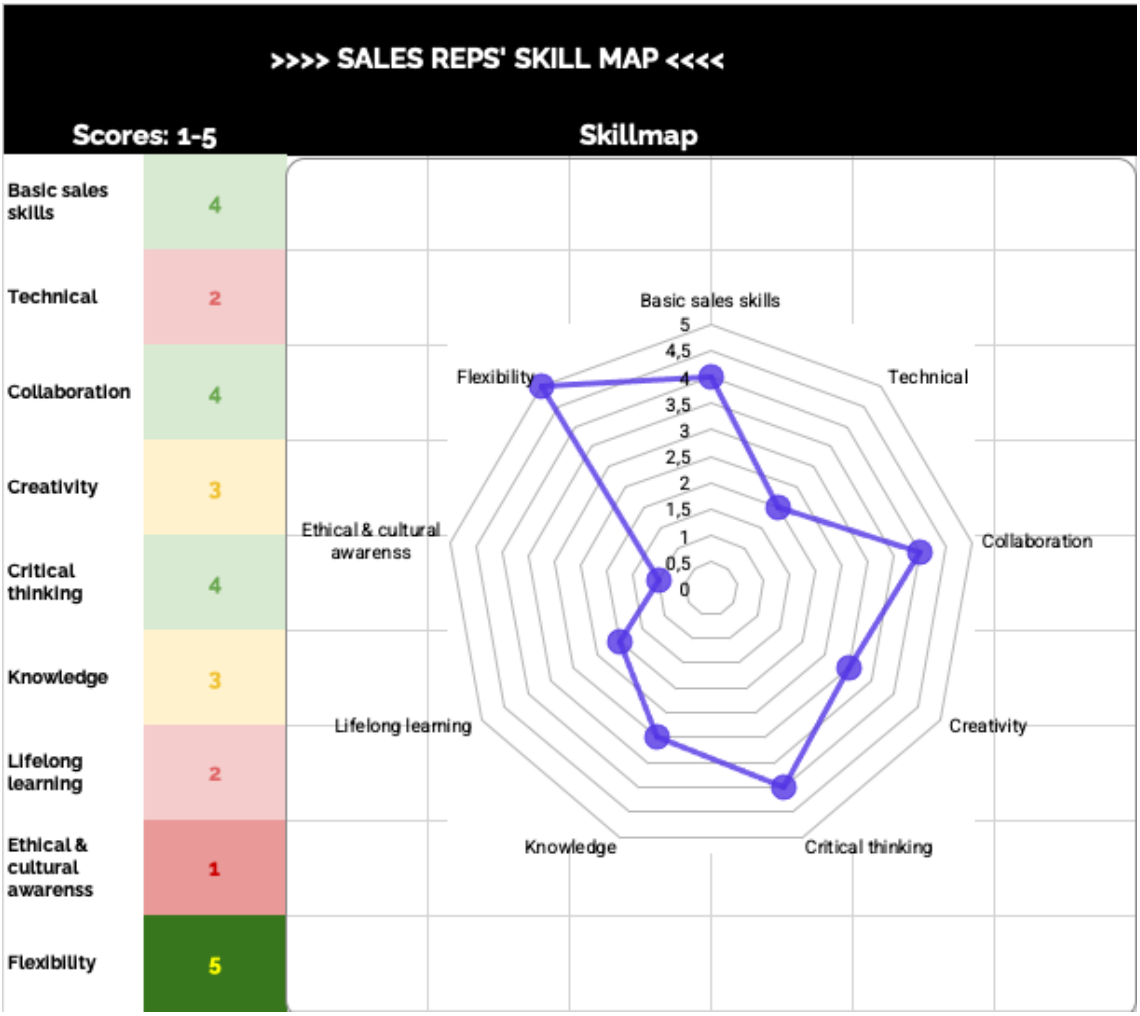
# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Digital skill scorecard

| Skills | Definition | Score | 1 = Starting point | 2 = Satisfactory | 3 = Good | 4 = Very good | 5 = Excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BASIC SALES SKILLS | The skills to transmit information effectively to others, to cognitively process and understand a problem and actively use knowledge to find a solution to a problem. | 4 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| TECHNICAL + INFORMATION MANAGEMENT | The skills to use digital technologies and tools to accomplish practical tasks and efficiently search, select, and organize information to make informed decisions. | 4 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| COLLABORATION | The skills to use digital technologies to develop a social network, work in a team to exchange information, negotiate agreements, and make decisions with mutual respect for each other. | 4 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| CREATIVITY | The skills to use to generate new or previously unknown ideas, treat familiar ideas in a new way and transform such ideas into a product, service or process. | 3 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| CRITICAL THINKING | The skills to make informed judgements and choices about obtained information and communicate using reflective reasoning and sufficient evidence. | 4 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| KNOWLEDGE | The skills to use and develop knowledge about products, solutions and customers' lives and to adapt that knowledge in changing customer and industry environments. | 3 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| LIFELONG LEARNING | The skills to constantly explore new opportunities when using digital tools that can be integrated into an environment to continually improve one's capabilities. | 3 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| ETHICAL & CULTURAL AWARENESS | To behave in a socially responsible way, show awareness and knowledge of legal and ethical aspects, and cultural understanding and respect other cultures. | 3 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |
| FLEXIBILITY | The skills to adapt one's thinking, attitude or behavior to changing technological environments. | 4 | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE | INSERT REQUIREMENT HERE |

Digital skill scorecard, modified from Advance B2B (n.d.)

Appendix 2. Digital sales skill map




Digital sales skill map, modified from Advance B2B (n.d.)