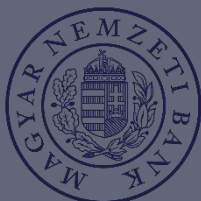




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International Scientific Conference  
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Sopron, 2021. november 4.  
4 November 2021, Sopron



**PANDÉMIA – FENNTARTHATÓ GAZDÁLKODÁS  
– KÖRNYEZETTUDATOSSÁG / PANDEMIC  
– SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT – ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS  
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## Explaining Correlations of Digital Transformation and Adaptiveness in B2B Sales in Relation to Resilience

**Günther MAIER**

PhD Student

*University of Applied Sciences PhD Programme in International Economic Relations and Management, Burgenland, Austria*

### Abstract

The sales environment and specifically B2B sales have changed tremendously in the last couple of years. Especially the pandemic crisis has addressed disruption regarding sales strategies. The sales force as well as sales managers and the entire organization faces challenges to operate and perform with the new behavior of buyers. Actual research in this field underpins that digital transformation and an adaptive sales force could help to create a more resilient strategy in B2B sales. Technological advances have been a driving force in these changes, warranting scientific inquiry into the use of new technologies in business development. The article outlines the extant literature on digital transformation and adaptive selling in B2B sales. Based on interviews with sales managers the author explored how these managers could transpose adaption in their business strategy. Based on the assumption that the salesforce provides solutions like products and services to their customers, the potential benefit of adaptive selling and digital transformation will be discussed. In the last section of this article the author examines the gaps in the scientific literature and discuss these with suggestions on how adaptive selling and transformation could support resilient sales strategies in the B2B sales.

*Keywords:* B2B sales, adaptive sales, digital transformation, resilience

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### 1. Introduction

The sales environment is subjected to great tensions in these challenging times. Especially, the B2B market has to overcome changes in the last decades (Lussier–Hartmann, 2017). The pandemic crisis has accelerated the pressure on salespeople to rethink their sales strategies (Cuevas, 2018; Lim, 2020; Cankurtaran–Beverland, 2020). To overcome such sudden economic challenges, it will be utmost important to implement resilient strategies. Resilience in the organization as well as in the deployed strategic processes will strengthen the firms position on the market.

Many companies know in general that they have to transform their organization but why did they fail so often? This present article will contribute on that gap in the academic literature in case that the author will examine the holistic view through the mentioned factors. This means in detail that it is not enough to implement a particular digital tool. The total sales process like it is described by Tuli et al. (2007) of requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment as well as post deployment support has to be adapted accordingly.

The requirement for organizations to adapt their sales process is not new. In the past, too, the salespeople were forced to adapt their process and strategies. Since Dubinsky (1980) established the seven-step process, which was referring to the AIDA model, the sales process was adapted continuously according to the market behavior (Maier, 2021).

In these days, organizations find themselves in an unpredictable situation which has disrupted the traditional functions. Interruption appeared especially in the B2B sector. McKinsey

& Company (2020) revealed from a quantitative survey of 3600 B2B sales insiders that customers expecting a shift to a digital transformation which will be in place also after the pandemic situation. COVID-19 shifted sales in general to the next level (Gavin et al., 2020).

Evidence of such a preference of non-face-to-face communication was confirmed by Ray et al. (2020). They discovered that especially B2B customers prefer technology based activities instead of traditional face-to-face interactions where it is possible. Communication like live chats, WhatsApp or Signal, E-mails, video communication with Microsoft Teams or Zoom brought a new sales situation in the organizations and especially in the salesforce. The sudden change of the customer behavior forces sales managers to rethink and adapt their strategies and processes (Rangarajan et al., 2021).

This present article reveals the extant literature regarding digital transformation as well as the necessary adaption of the selling process in the B2B. Cankurtaran and Beverland (2020) state in their research that the sales environment actually, but also after Covid-19, will be in a learning phase. Organizations have to managing the risk of uncertain situations, therefore digital transformation and the related adaption of the sales process could help firms to strengthen their mindset and be resilient against unpredictable situations (Prothero, 2020).

This article associates digital transformation and adaptive selling regarding the actual situation of COVID-19. The research reveals close correlations between these two factors and confirms that some content of these factors will remain also after the pandemic situation.

The main research question in this review is as follows.

1. Could adaption of sales processes and digital transformation lead to more resilience?

Academics are interested in the field of transformation in general especially in digital transformation whereby digital transformation is also driven through practical software firms. However, to underpin the correlation of resilience between adaptive selling and digital transformation the author conducted five qualitative interviews with sales managers in different B2B industries. This should emphasize the importance of this article and the correlated the findings in relation to resilience.

Additionally, the author will give avenues for future research base on the findings of this article to find further managerial implications.

## **2. Methodology**

This present article started with a systematic review of the extant literature in terms of digital transformation and adaptive selling in relation to resilience especially in the B2B sales environment.

To get an overview on the topic of digital transformation and adaptive selling the author searched in more general way. After the general approach to the topic, which yielded insights in B2B sales challenges, the author refined the search strategy.

In the second phase of the search process the author combined search terms to get more specific results related to digital transformation and adaptive selling. Following terms were used for the search process: “Communication, COVID-19, disruption, marketing management, organization, sales force, sales channel, sales cycle, sales process and sales technology”. These terms were combined with “Resilience, B2B sales, adaptive selling, digital transformation and business development”. The author used following scientific sources ABI/Inform, EMERALD Insight, ELSEVIER, GOOGLE Scholar, SAGE Premier and SPRINGER Compact. In total the author has used 48 combinations to search for the related topic and yielded 28 publications for the specific research article.

To support the literature findings and gather unique insights the author conducted five in-depth quality interviews. The questions in the interviews were constructed in an open way, so that it was possible to get as much information as possible. The author focused on six categories: General Information, Products, Customer, Organization, Performance, Training. The selection of the interviewees was based on different industrial fields. This was necessary to get meaning-

ful feedback on the topic of resilience through different industries. Following sectors were covered through the in-depth interviews: construction industry, industrial equipment industry, certification service business, energy service business and employment and training business.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

As mentioned in the introduction of this article there is an ongoing change in the B2B world in case of digital transformation (Gavin et al., 2020). Within this change to digitalization as well as usage of new technologies for communication and process operation the organization as well as the salespeople are forced to adapt their traditional processes.

Many companies struggle in times of deploying the processes. Prior academic studies focused on specific details of the digital transformation but not on the holistic process (Guenzi–Habel, 2020). This holistic process considers the adaptiveness of the organizational processes as well as the adaptive process of the individual salespeople. The following aspects shall evolve contribution into this rare, researched topic and will foster resilience in the organization.

#### ***3.1. Digital transformation***

In the last four decades the sales as well as the environment around sales has changed continuously over the time. Crises like the actual Covid-19 pandemic situation has pushed this effect and accelerated digital transformation (Ray et al., 2020). Such effect is seen in different industries. In some industries the impact will be higher and in others not. Important in such situation is, that a firm will recover fast from such difficult situation. Digitalization could help to implement resilient processes and technologies so that the impact will be smaller and shorter than in traditional ways.

To implement digital processes the author, investigate in transformation in general and examined the existing literature. The holistic approach on transformation spawn three key elements.

Cuevas (2018) revealed with his research that three dominant key trends will be visible in relation to sales transformation. First, there is the customer behavior which has changed. This was also confirmed from other researchers like Holland and Young (2010) who stated that the force of the seller has shifted to the buyer. Secondly, the rivalry against competitors and the level of globalization. Finally, and this is the important one for this paragraph are the new digital technologies.

Approximately 20 years ago scholars began to focus with investigations on digital technologies like social media and online marketing (Kumar et al., 2020). The youngest achievement in sales is the support of artificial intelligence (AI) which could support salesforce in their performance (Singh et al., 2019). With AI also visual aids are included to support the salesforce in their daily business. This digital enhancement helped firms to pay off investments and become more resilient to the fast-changing market behavior.

Visual aids in relation to sales are scarce researched in the academic literature. Maier and Ledinger (2021) revealed in their literature review that visual aids are widely used in the practical daily business. There are huge possibilities to support the salesforce with enhanced visual tools. However, in regards of academical literature this field is rarely examined.

In view of these dynamically changing requirements, sales becomes a strategic resource (Binckebank, 2015) and an important element of corporate competitiveness (Storbacka et al., 2009). In case of the attractiveness in the academic audience, Lane and Piercy (2009) argue that such dynamically requirements do not have a specific end point in relation to the sales process. The “strategic sales” shall continuously verify the whole sales process from the customer requirement till the after sales support. With the investigation of Lane and Piercy (2009) the approach of and holistic view on the sales is one of the rare gathered from the literature review and contribute to resilience processes.

Companies strive to verify the right digital communication system, platform, channel or tool. The complex topic is highly interesting for scholars therefore the literature will pay attention on digital ecosystem (Peruchi et al., 2022).

In difficult economic times it is necessary to know how you can reach a customer. This will strengthen the resilience of a firm because otherwise you lose the relationship and support to your customer. Guenzi and Habel (2020) stated in their research that digital leaders have established multiple channels so that it is possible to communicate through different channels. The possibility to communicate in this way increases the frequency of communication and the qualitative information.

Digital transformation is moving on and has massive accelerated in the last year through the pandemic crisis. Companies are forced to transform their organizations to be competitive in the non-face-to-face times. The difficulty for firms is, how to start with digital transformation.

Wengler et al. (2021) revealed in their research that digital transformation is depending to three success factors named as: "Process, People and Data". These success factors give evidence of the importance on digital transformation along the whole sales process.

When organizations are implementing proper digital technologies in their processes, they could increase their organisations resilience and productivity. This help organizations to be flexible and agile in their operations. Two important factors which were highlighted in the literature are, that the management must be fully aware and convince their employees for digital transformation. The second factor is, that the business or sales process must be redesigned according to the customers behaviour. It is of utmost importance to verify the sales process in the view of the customers' needs and not from the organization's possibilities.

### ***3.2. Adaptive Selling***

Beside the digital enhancement in sales through the pandemic situation, which improves the resilience in general of an organization, the implemented processes have to be adapted as well.

Sales and the entire organization have had to master challenging times even before the pandemic situation. The dynamic process in sales forces sales leader to adapt their selling processes from time to time (Rangarajan et al., 2021).

Looking back to a time before COVID-19, sales organizations were mainly confronted to consider technological changes which means digital transformations in the B2B environment. At this time resilience was not the preliminary focus. The foreground of change was seen in the technological enhanced products or services which shaped the behavior of B2B customers (Guenzi–Habel, 2020).

Special occurrences with a sudden disruptive behavior, like Covid-19, accelerate to change the priorities in the B2B environment. Guenzi (2020) confirmed the finding in his qualitative studies that crises like the financial crises in 2008 as well as the actual pandemic situation forces organizations to implement initiatives to overcome these disruptive changes.

Overcome in that sense means to be more resilient in challenging situations. Resilience according definition is "the ability of the system to withstand a major disruption within acceptable time and composite costs and risks" (Haines, 2009). Same thoughts and opinions were mentioned also from other academics in the literature.

Sharma et al. (2020) underpins the opinion of the author that organizations have to be aware of the dynamic situations in the market. Salespeople find themselves in an unprecedented global market. Therefore, the salespeople have to be awake and become more agile and flexible as well as adaptive in their sales strategy. That means the role of salespeople has to be adapted as well.

Rangarajan et al. (2021) examined in their research the whole sales process from the beginning till the end. The aim of his research was to see how technological adaptability and adaptive sales behavior have changed the traditional F2F (face to face) process. To verify these changes the former mentioned "seven step model" from Dubinsky (1980) was used to compare the sales process before and after the COVID-19.

The detailed description of Rangarajan et al. (2021) for each step in the style of Dubinsky (1980) outlines the transformation for salespeople. It shows modifications in all seven steps whereby the use of technology and the role of salespeople seems relevant. The biggest impact could be found in following different aspects and is crucial for resilience behavior.

Customers nowadays are in the position to gather information online before they are getting in touch with the customer. This means that customer will have specific information in his mind and the salesforce must complement or contradict these thoughts. In such situations it is utmost important for the salesforce to understand the customers industry and product. Rainsberger (2021) revealed in her book that these phase of “collecting information” is the biggest part in the sales process. She highlighted in her research that 70% of a sales process will be used from buyers to gather information. Only in the remaining 30% the sales will be involved to support the decision making process.

This finding will be supported also from other researchers in a way that buyers tend to use more information which could be gathered online. Ray et al. (2020) confirmed the statements above that customer show a preference for non face-to-face communications with salespeople. They revealed in their research that new available technology and multichannel usage is most welcome for the buyer’s needs. Such information shall ring the alarm bells for organizations to rethink their sales process. It is utmost important to be present at multiple sales channels. Since nearly two years many employees are working remote from their home office. If firms have adapted their sales channels and portfolio according to digital availability, they have shortened the impact of the sales “lockdown”.

In relation to the non F2F communication, the technology impact through the pandemic situation was forced to use digital technologies. The situation of the pandemic crisis pushed initiatives to implement and uses new technologies in sales organizations (Singh, 2020).

Notwithstanding the above, changes to uses technological support in sales was recognized earlier from researchers which have examined the sales environment years before (Bonnet, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2014). Contingently, this technology enhancement could help to recover faster in such dramatic situations like the actual pandemic one.

Sharma et al. (2020) summarized the most important changes in three different categories regarding adaptability and flexibility. These are: “function, scale and technology”. Function is related to the different functions of salespeople which have to be performed in front of the customer and is more or less the role of the salesperson. Scale adaptability refers to parts of a process which could be in or outsourced. Technological adaptability means the flexible usage of technological devices or software to perform in front of the customer.

The research of Sharma (2020) in adaptive sales and flexibility of salesforce is up to date with the actual situation of the pandemic crisis. The interesting analogy are the academic parallels to the findings of Weitz (1978). Weitz (1978) supports the statement that adaptive selling uses communication techniques which is focused on specific customers and is in the position to be adjusted to the customers’ requirements.

The author revealed through the literature review that academics in the past investigate in different parts like digital transformation and adaptability. The holistic view of the total sales process and the correlation seems to be the biggest gap and could contribute to resilient strategies for firms.

#### **4. Empirical findings**

To contribute the literature review as well as the findings therein the author performed five in-depth interviews in relation to resilience in sales with the focus on the pandemic crisis COVID-19. These interviews provide in general evidence on the findings from the literature but open new insights in respect of the holistic few of resilience and sales processes.

The author developed a questionnaire for the in-depth interviews which covers different categories and priorities. The aim of these interviews was to get unique insights and derive

parallels on the literature findings. To gain as much information as possible the author constructed the interviews as open questions in a semi-structured style.

The author prepared the interview in the style of Wengler et al. (2021), who stated three success factors within digital transformation. These are “Process, People and Data”.

The author underpins these success factors in general but gathered additional unique inside information regarding resilience through the interviews. Seen from the five interviewees it seems that the most important factor in sales is the “salesperson” itself. One of the interviewees answer the following question as follows:

What are the most valuable factors in your company or what makes your company valuable?

*“Our patented products, which build the basis for innovation and R&D are highly important. But most important are the employees working on our ideas. People are the most important factor for a successful company as the best idea will not succeed if your coworkers are not passionate about it. And as many examples from daily business show, passionate people can make also a bad idea beneficial.”*

The author asked the interviewees about other factors like the sales “process”. This statement was rather new in that way, that the organization must have mandatory fixed structures but must have flexible patterns to adjust the organization according to environmental influences.

In regards of “data” the interviewees show a consensus that data from customers, products and more is mainly available. The problem is, that these data is not available in the right way to use it. In terms of resilience this is a further important topic to consider. One interviewee said:

*“Our company gathered so many data and stored it on so many places in the organization that we should have a huge portfolio of product and customer data. However, actually it is not possible for new employees or even for employees which stay years with the company to make such data useful”*

The interviewees were asked in specific to the topics of technology transformation as well as adaptive selling. In regards of technology transformation, the author differentiates the question on the products and the process itself. However, on both categories the interviewees confirmed that technology enhancement is important for companies to overcome different market challenges and strengthen resilient strategies. One interviewee answered the product related question as follows.

Do you think that your product could be adapted with additional features, or you can offer additional equipment to your product?

*“Our product is a standard solution for some applications but due to its flexibility it can be combined with many other systems and gadgets. So yes, especially in terms of software we have plenty of possibilities to adapt and upgrade our product and fit it to our customer’s needs.”*

In the same way the author asked the interviewees in open questions about the adaptive-ness of the salesperson and the processes. All these information’s helped the author to gather a holistic picture of the actual situation regarding the pandemic dares.

Adaptiveness will request more responsibility for salespeople. What is your opinion on that?

*“Salesperson needs to become an allrounder, who not only knows, but understands the needs of his clients. To understand all the needs, salesperson need a deep insight into clients’ processes. Additionally, salesperson needs a course/education in solution selling.”*

With the in-depth interview the author asked all interview partners about the actual challenges in different industry sectors. Beside the main topics of digital transformation as well as adaptive behavior the author used also motivation, resources and risk topics to find out more about the concerns of organizations and the salesforce in these provoking times.

## 5. Discussion

In the last four decades the sales environment has changed dramatically. Resilience plays an increasingly important role for many B2B companies. Globalization as well as the technology enhancement has forced new selling methods and shaped the customers behavior. Crises and unpredictable market events further unsettle companies Salespeople find themselves in and fast changing and vulnerable world (Saura et al., 2019).

The present article starts with a systematic literature research on resilience in sales in relation to digital transformation and adaptive selling. The author focused thereby on the B2B sales environment. Through a refined search process, the author selected “adaptive selling” and “digital transformation” as important drivers related to resilience in the sales process. To foster the author’s considerations he complements the review with five in-depth interviews.

To manage difficult market behaviors, academics have noted that digital support in sales and in the related processes could help to balance the lack of time to be more efficient or lack of information. With the enhancement of software tools and devices it was possible to increase the profit of firms and gather a lot of data related to customers business and their behavior. Tools like CRM (customer relation systems) were implemented and used to manage customer and sales data. But what does this have to do with resilience?

The mentioned hurdle of resilience in this article underpins the research of Wengler et al. (2015). He stated that the digital transformation is an evolving process and has no end point. This has to be aware in firms’ management but from academic investigations it is evident that many companies struggle in terms of resilience. Since the 1980’s the sales world is in the position to use CRM software tools. Nowadays, there are also a lot of other tools and technologies available like sales force automation (SFA) or virtual reality (VR). All these digital aids shall help in particular situations to create the sales process more efficient and save time for the salesforce. If these digital aids were used in a holistic manner of a firm, it will strengthen the firms position in case of resilience.

That means the total organization must be aware to use, maintain and understand the implementation of digital technologies in the sales process. To raise the potential of the technological aids the employees must be trained to use them and understand the benefit. The interviewees argued that continuous training shall be implemented in the sales process to use existing technologies efficiently. For example, firms which used online meetings before Covid-19 switched instantly to online meetings. Organization which mainly focused on F2F communication would need several weeks or months to change their traditional behavior.

Many companies have recognized during the pandemic crises to use digital technologies. The problem is that these companies struggle to use it effectively. Therefore, scholars pay attention on the digital ecosystem to understand the deployment of digital technologies (Peruchi et al., 2022).

The author revealed through the in-depth interviews that the many companies which use digital technologies are not aware about the holistic process view. This means that they have to adapt the processes to consider the change of the behavior of the customers. Only with the combination of both factors it will help to create a more resilient strategy of the firm.

In case of adaptive selling the author gathered quite a lot of academic literature. Scholars confirm that adaptive selling was interesting for academics even before the pandemic crises starts (Kwak et al., 2019). In times before COVID-19 adaptive selling was mainly linked to the organizational transformation.

The adaption of the organization as well as the selling strategy of a firm is utmost important in case of resilient behavior. Especially, in or after times of crises, the sales team has to start or withstand resistance from the market and overcome hurdles. Therefore, a strong team like “One salesforce” has to be established and should be adaptive in their behavior (Sheth-Sharma, 2008).

The revealed literature related to COVID-19 as well as the in-depth interviews unveil that adaptive selling has shifted the importance to the individual salespeople. Since the start of the

pandemic crises at the beginning of 2020 there were rare literature available which cover such specific topics. Through the in-depth interviews the author gained unique insight into the complex topic of transformation. Most of the interviewees argued that the organization has to provide a general rigid structure to cover the main processes. However, the organization should be flexible and agile enough to restructure according to the market or customer behavior. One of the success factors hereby seems to be the reaction time to be competitive on the market.

The in-depth interviews underpin the importance of an adaptive salesforce. Salespeople who are the forefront of a company have to be flexible and agile, like the organization in the background. Such a person should have degrees of freedom in some ways to adjust the sales behavior and adapt it for each customer. Passionate salespeople who are intrinsic motivated to find the right solution for their customers need to have this flexibility to be creative. Such creativity supports the resilience to find the right solution for the customer.

Zoltners et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative survey of salespeople, to verify how much time they spend on their different activities. He found out that only 35% of the total sales activity will be used for selling purposes. Most of that sales activity time is consumed by phone or E-mail. Another 41% of the activities will be used for servicing the sales process. The rest will be built of administration work and others.

In the in-depth interviews the author asked the interviewees about their daily routines. In other words, the answer should prove the literature findings.

The evidence was given through the interviewees. They mentioned that the average of non-selling or administrative work is approximately 60 to 70% of their daily business. Most of their communication will be internally which means phone calls or E-mails. The communication behavior was verified from the interviewees with approximately 70% internal and 30% external communication.

The feedback supports the authors foreshadowing and shows the importance of resilience. When people are trapped in daily routines, they couldn't be creative and agile to find right solutions. Managers have to provide the organizational degree of freedom so that employees could adapt their process and be creative to overcome market setbacks.

In summary the author pointed out that the implementation of digital transformation in the organization as well as the adaptive selling process of the sales force will increase the resilience of a firm. The capability of resilience on the fast-changing demands on the market strengthen the position of a firm. Basis for such considerations is the holistic view of resilience on the organizational process.

Beside the above unique insights into resilience in sales there are some limitations on this present article. The author used a very limited number of interviewees from Austria. Seen from the academic standpoint this verification is too less draw back a general conclusion on resilience. To get resilient results and feedback there shall be carried out a quantitative survey in different business fields and countries.

The present research covers a short-term consideration in case of the pandemic situation. There should be further investigations on long-term research. The research was done in the middle of COVID-19 so further studies shall identify long-time implications on resilience.

## **6. Conclusions**

Salespeople as well as the responsible sales managers find themselves in an unpredictable world. The actual pandemic situation implicates organizations in tension with their sales strategy and expected targets and forced them to rethink their processes related to resilience.

Firms have to rethink and to adapt their sales strategy and processes to be more resilient and recover faster after such disruptive events. The author evolved two important factors. One of the success factors is the digital transformation and the other is the adaptive salesforce and the related sales processes. In particular both topics exists in the literature but the gap in case of resilience is the holistic view and the interactivity of these two elements.



The author carried out a systematic literature research of resilience in relation to digital transformation and adaptive selling. To contribute the literature findings with new and unique insights the author conducted five in-depth interviews. Beside salesforce supported aids also organizational properties were considered from the author. Flexible and agile sales process structures allow to react quickly and support resilient behavior of a firm.

This is one of the first papers which explored digital transformation and adaptive sales process related to disruptive events in combination to resilient strategies.

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