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Factors promoting the digital sales force effectiveness in B2B organization

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Master Thesis | Abstract

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Factors promoting the digital sales force effectiveness in B2B organization

This study focuses on the digital sales channel and enabling the digital sales force to success. There is a massive change happened related in the B2B-decicion makers buying process, especially after Covid-19. Digitalization has shaped the traditional customer buying journeys and virtual tools has giving more opportunities to improve the sales. Also, customers' digital journey has changed the traditional buying process. However, companies are still struggling with digital tools and systems when they need to implement them into organizations' use.

The study aims to answer the question "Which factors effect to digital sales effectiveness?". The aim is to highlight the success factors which improve the sales force effectiveness and those factors which can slow down the digital development in B2B-organizations. The aim is to give an overall view how B2B-organizations can avoid the barriers and implement their digital sales management with the best possible way.

The study was implemented as qualitative research. There were altogether 10 Sales Directors interviewed with structured questions and statements using Likert-model.

The results revealed that even during the year 2024 it is important for companies to consider digital readiness, adoption, and sustainability when it comes to digital sales force effectiveness and implementing new digital platforms for sales teams. The focus should be in the factors which are promoting the success and lead to business growth. It is also vital for organizations to avoid the factors slowing down the digital sales force effectiveness.

Keywords: Digital Sales Management, Sales Force Effectiveness, Customer Journey, B2B-buying process

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Digitaalisen myynnin tehokkuutta edistävät tekijät B2B-organisaatiossa

Covid-19:n jälkeen B2B-päätöksentekijöiden ostoprosessissa on tapahtunut valtava muutos. Digitalisaatio on muokannut perinteisiä asiakaspolkuja, ja virtuaaliset työkalut ovat tarjonneet enemmän mahdollisuuksia myynnin parantamiseen. Myös asiakkaiden digitaalinen matka on muuttanut perinteistä ostoprosessia. Yritykset kamppailevat kuitenkin edelleen digitaalisten työkalujen ja järjestelmien käyttöönoton kanssa. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy digitaalisen myynnin menestyksen mahdollistamiseen.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on vastata kysymykseen "Mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat digitaalisen myynnin tehokkuuteen?". Tavoitteena on korostaa tekijöitä, jotka parantavat myyntivoiman tehokkuutta, sekä niitä tekijöitä, jotka voivat hidastaa digitaalista kehitystä B2B-organisaatioissa. Tutkimus on antaa kokonaiskuvaa siitä, kuinka B2B-organisaatiot voivat välttää tietyt haasteet ja toteuttaa digitaaliseen myyntiin liittyvät käyttöönotot parhaalla mahdollisella tavalla.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimuksena, jossa myyntijohtajia haastateltiin strukturoiduilla kysymyksillä ja väittämillä käyttäen Likert-mallia.

Tulokset paljastivat, että yritysten tulee huomioida digitaalinen valmius, omaksuminen sekä pitkäaikaisuus, kun kyse on digitaalisen myyntivoiman tehokkuudesta ja uusien digitaalisten alustojen käyttöönotosta myyntitiimeille. Kyseisissä projekteissa tulee keskittyä tekijöihin, jotka edistävät tiimien onnistumista ja johtavat liiketoiminnan kasvuun. On myös tärkeää, että organisaatiot tunnistavat ne tekijät, jotka hidastavat digitaalisen myynnin tehokkuutta.

Avainsanat: Digitaalisen myynnin johtaminen, Myynnin tehokkuus, asiakaspolku, B2B-ostoprosessi.

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List of abbreviations (or) symbols

B2B	Business to Business
PPE	Personal protective equipment
AI	Artificial intelligence

SaaS	Software as a Service
CRM	Customer relationship management
TAM	Technology acceptance model
MVP	Minimum viable product
EET	Early engagement testing

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and commissioner

Digitalization has given enormous opportunities to salespersons. It has also formed the whole sales and buying processes. Especially during the Covid-19, sales was moved very fast from face to face to virtual meetings held via different platforms. The implementation and use of tools which could have taken years, were done in months or even in weeks. According to Blount (2020, p.4), “in an instant, to remain relevant and competitive, salespeople, account managers, entrepreneurs, and business professionals had to shift the way they were engaging prospects and customers” (Blount, 2020, p. 4).

Contemporary business landscape is increasingly competitive, which makes the companies look for new tools which are offered by the digitalization. This concerns all companies from every business field. The need to study digital sales management and sales force effectiveness gives an overview to companies which are implementing the digital transformation from traditional sales approaches to modern sales strategies. Certain businesses already know how to take advantage from all digital tools and integrate them to sales teams but especially for companies which are in the phase of adaptation of digitalization, it is vital to understand the factors which are influencing to the implementation. There are several studies about digital tools, social media and B2B sales. However, focusing on traditional business such as office supplies related to digital sales management there are hardly any. This study aims to bridge this gap by researching the factors that are affecting to successful digital sales management. In addition, there is a need to highlight the factors which are slowing down the development. (Good, Bolman Pullins & Rouziou, 2022; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Paschen, Paschen, Pala & Kietzmann, 2021).

This study’s commissioner is Lyreco Finland Ltd. which is operating on B2B sector in Finland and the research is implemented for the company. Lyreco Finland Ltd. provides office products and solutions for workplaces. Lyreco

Finland is part of Lyreco Group which is a leading global distributor of workplace products and solutions. The company's business revolves around providing a wide range of products and services to support businesses and organizations in their daily operations. Lyreco's selection includes over 10 000 office supplies, furniture and workspace solutions, cleaning and hygiene products, personal protective equipment (PPE) and different technology products such as mouses and screens for computers. More specifically, office supplies can include stationery, paper products, writing instruments, desk accessories, and organizational tools, workplace solutions include office furniture solutions, ranging from desks, chairs, and storage units. Cleaning and hygiene category includes cleaning and hygiene products, cleaning chemicals, hygiene dispensers, and personal care products. (Lyreco Suomi, 2024.)

In Finland, Lyreco has 180 people working and 75 are in sales operations. The sales teams are divided in public and private segments. There are groups focusing on retail, public organizations such as hospitals and cities', small and medium-sized companies, small businesses, corporates, and international businesses. In addition, the sales operations are decided into hunters and farmers. Separated from general office supplies, there are also business units and salespersons for health care and audio-visual products and coffee solutions. All sales teams are operating in nationwide. During the last two years the company has started to focus more on digital sales by implementing new CRM tool for all salespersons and allocating more resources to digital sales channels. (Lyreco Suomi, 2024.)

1.2 Research questions

This study aims to consider the digital sales management in a B2B-organization and highlight the factors which promote the sales force effectiveness in the digital B2B-sales. The main research question is "Which factors effect to digital sales effectiveness?". The study includes a qualitative research method where several Sales Directors are interviewed with open-ended questions.

The sub-questions for the research are:

a) Which are the factors promoting the digital sales force effectiveness?

b) Are there factors which can slow down the digital sales development within the B2B-companies?

The scope of the thesis includes the analysis of the collected data and the outcomes and highlights which are described in the results.

1.3 Implementing the research

The data collection was implemented from the ten Sales Directors who has experience from companies who have been in the process of digital transformation and implementing new digital tools for sales teams. These Sales Directors were interviewed during the April 2024 during the week 17 and 18. The interviews were implemented with 40 minutes long virtual meetings and the questions were open-ended questions. The data from the interviews were analyzed.

This study focuses on interviewing the sales leaders who have experience of digital sales initiatives. Those persons operate on traditional B2B-businesses, on the fields of B2B office services where products and physical services are offered to offices, stores, restaurants, and manufacture atmospheres. These interviewed sales leaders are offering their products or services only for B2B sector. The titles, experiences, and business fields of the companies they work can be seen from the table 1. This study excluded technology, SaaS (software as a service) and digital service providers and businesses.

2 Digital Sales effectiveness

2.1 Digital sales management

Jobber & Lancaster (2006) and Zoltners, Sinha, Shastri & Lorimer (2021) highlight that the role of digitalization in sales management is remarkable and that digitalization brings new roles for sales management. They continue, that digital tools have impacted to several areas such as customers' buying processes, journeys, and decision-making, targeting, communications, buyer behavioral patterns, brand management, pricing, building customer relationship and performance measurement. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Jobber & Lancaster, 2006.)

The theory of sales management provides a structured approach to optimizing sales operations and achieving sales goals. It involves various elements, from strategic planning to team organization, training, and technology adoption, all with the aim of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization's sales efforts. Effective sales management can lead to increased revenue, improved customer relationships, and long-term business growth. The areas of sales management theory are planning, organizing sales teams, setting sales strategy, creating a sales process, training and development, performance evaluation, adaptation and innovation and customer relationship management. (Berne, 2016.)

According to Jobber & Lancaster (2006), digital sales management is a framework that guides the planning, organizing, directing, and controlling of an organization's sales activities. It provides a systematic approach to the management of a company's sales force and strategies to achieve sales objectives. Moorman & Day (2010) describe that digital sales management involves the strategic planning, execution, and optimization of sales activities through digital channels. It encompasses leveraging digital technologies and platforms to reach customers, drive sales, and enhance overall sales performance. This discipline integrates elements of traditional sales

management with digital marketing strategies to create a cohesive approach to selling in the digital age. According to Piercy & Nikala (2010, pp. 15−16), the concept of management of digital sales pertain to the strategic oversight and operational control of sales activities conducted through digital channels. Also, Venkatesan, Farris & Wilcox (2021, p. 2) emphasize that data-driven decision-making, personalized customer experiences, and agile methodologies in managing the digitalization of sales processes. It involves designing and implementing sales strategies tailored to the digital landscape, leveraging technology to reach and engage customers, and measuring performance through digital metrics. (Jobber & Lancaster, 2006; Moorman & Day, 2010; Piercy & Nikala, 2010; Venkatesan et al., 2021.)

Online sales management encompasses the strategies and processes employed to effectively sell products or services through digital channels (Moorman & Day, 2010, p.14). According to Viitala & Jylhä (2021), today customers, also on B2B-business, use digital channels to receive information and have moved to digital platforms to buy. That is why marketing communication should be aligned with sales processes. They highlight that even the multichannel-marketing activities and promotions are important to increase the awareness and create demand and even the chatbots and digital technology helps the sales, the interaction between sales and prospects and customers is also very important. Organizations can effectively manage digital sales by aligning sales strategies with digital marketing efforts, leveraging data analytics for sales optimization, and integrating digital channels into the overall sales process. (Moorman & Day, 2010; Viitala & Jylhä, 2021.)

Alavi & Habel (2021) highlight the human side in their research which should be studied further in sales organizations. The human side consider more the feelings and views of salespersons when they are taking new digital tools in use. This study focus on technical related matters and considers the organizations' point of view. (Alavi & Habel, 2021.)

Goleman's (1995) model highlights five key components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social

skills. This framework underscores the critical role of emotional intelligence in effective leadership and organizational success. By cultivating emotional intelligence, leaders can better manage their emotions and understand the emotions of others, enabling them to make informed decisions and handle complex interpersonal dynamics with finesse. (Goleman, 1995; Holt, Marques, Hu, & Wood, 2017.)

2.2 Digital transformation and buying process

Sales processes and environment has changed so rapidly that instead of evolution some researches are talking about revolution (Rantala & Kock, 2017). Especially during Covid-19 almost all physical communications was done via virtual tools (Blount, 2020). Several studies and scientific articles states that Covid-19 and pandemic time changed dramatically the form of negotiating with prospects. On that time sales experienced an enormous change going from physical meetings to virtual platforms and remote meetings (Good et al., 2022; Blount, 2020; Lindenau, 2021). The changes are affecting to everyday work of sales personnel. Also, customers approaches are toward selling have changed. When potential customers can search information themselves, there is no need to salespersons to explain about the products or services extensively. However, prospects are expecting more from the meetings with salespersons when they already have good basic information from social media and their stakeholders, for example. (Rantala & Kock, 2017; Good et al., 2022; Blount, 2020; Lindenau, 2021.)

Since sales has been changing there are several platforms and tools available for sales today. In this study, different platforms which are aiming to sales effectiveness, are considered. B2B customer interactions are increasingly happening online, prompting companies to embrace new tech solutions to navigate these digital journeys. As traditional buying and selling processes transition to digital platforms, companies and managers must adapt their practices and toolsets to thrive. This shift demands a fusion of marketing and sales efforts to ensure a seamless customer experience across various

channels, from initial exposure to post-purchase engagement. Technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and social media are opening exciting avenues for B2B firms to better manage digital interactions with their customers. (Rusthollkarhu, Toukola, Aarikka-Stenroos and Mahlamäki, 2022.)

Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022, p. 241) define AI as “tools based on AI as computational agents that demonstrate intelligence by acting or reasoning and are technologically based on their ability to recognize patterns in data”. Also, AI-empowered tools are “tools that have one or more abilities based on their pattern recognition ability, letting the tools to demonstrate intelligence by acting or reasoning”. (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022, p. 241)

Mancuso, Messeni and Panniello, (2024) define platforms enable interactions between multiple groups of independent yet interconnected users who exchange physical goods, services, and information. As a result, platforms generate both intra-market and inter-market network effects, where the value of shared resources rises as the user base expands. Harnessing these network effects becomes a key driver of value creation for platforms themselves. Achieving this requires platforms to attract and engage users while facilitating the utilization of exchanged resources. (Mancuso et al., 2024.)

When it comes to digitalization it is good to highlight also the understanding the intricacies of business-to-business customer journeys is a pressing area of research. B2B companies grapple with emerging challenges in effectively controlling, managing, and shaping meaningful customer experiences, particularly in the realm of digital technologies. Defined as "the complete process a customer undergoes across all stages and touchpoints," (Rantala & Kock, 2017, p.124) the concept of customer journeys holds significant relevance in B2B scenarios. According to B2B Buyers Survey Report (2021), there can be even nine touchpoints before the decision maker is contacting or spoken with the sales representative or vendor. (Rantala & Kock, 2017; Lindenau, 2021.)

B2B relationships involve complex, enduring connections between organizational entities, introducing considerable intricacy and strain. These

relationships are dynamic, long-term, and ever-evolving, necessitating ongoing attention and a process-oriented approach for effective management. Lundin & Kindström (2023) defines a B2B customer journey as a conceptualized and an involving, complex process that entails various interactions and their flow over time. (Lundin & Kindström, 2023.)

Rangarajan, Sharma, Lyngdoh & Paesbrugghe, (2021) highlight that traditionally, sales functions have been able to dominate the whole customer buying process. Due to digital tools journeys and the touchpoints which potential customers go through have changed. Also, Zoeltners et al. (2021) underline that when the prospects are able to collect information themselves the buying process can be already went through 56 −76% before the first meeting of the sales. This is a significant change compared to the time before digitalization and due to digital marketing and content found from web platforms. It proofs that organization must reform their sales processes and consider more close collaboration between marketing and sales. Because prospects and customers are willing to find their information already before contacting the company and sales representatives it is crucial to be present already on the phase of awareness when the interest of potential customers are raised. There are also consideration and purchase phases which must be taken into consideration on the customer journey and buying processes because with the help of marketing organization can strengthen the image of their brand for the prospects and proof that they are worth purchase. That way digital marketing and platforms help the decision-making process smoother, and sales is able to grow business. (Rantala & Kock, 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2021; Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Digitalization impacts B2B customer journeys across three primary dimensions. First, it alters touchpoints by either incorporating new digital points of contact or streamlining existing ones. Second, it reshapes roles within these digitalized journeys, introducing new participant roles, engaging customers directly, and emphasizing collaboration. Lastly, digitalization transforms the entire process by extending its scope, enhancing functionality, and providing support throughout

its entirety. In this sense, digital and social touchpoints play enormous role in B2B customers' buying process. (Lundin & Kindstöm, 2023; Terho, Giovannetti & Cardinali, 2022.)

Zoltners et al. (2021) divides the decision-making process in five stages. Kock & Rantala (2017) describes how the process can be shared in three parts: awareness of the challenge, searching the information, considering the options, decision making and eventually evaluating the buying decision. There are also more approaches of buying processes, but for all there are three phases which are common: awareness, consideration and buying. In the figure 1 the digital and traditional buying processes are demonstrated and in the digital journey there are several digital touchpoints before the physical sales meeting (Kock & Rantala, 2017, p.135).

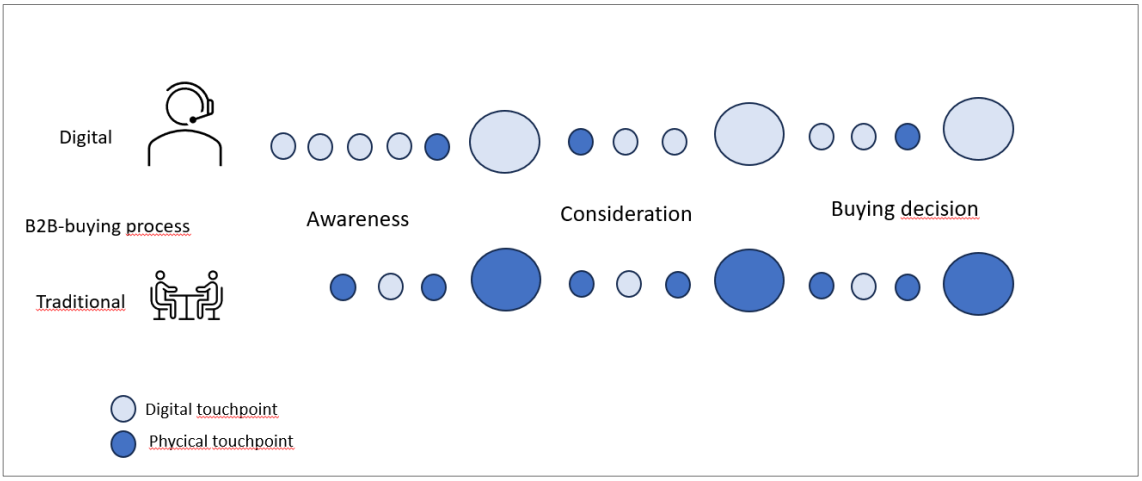

Figure 1. B2B-decision makers' touchpoints of the buying process during digitalization and previously (modified from Kock & Rantala, 2017, p.135)

From the buying journey and decision-making process there are also service phase and loyalty. These are happening after the awareness, consideration and loyalty phases and are very important parts of the customer journey. That can be seen in the figure 2 (Zoltners et al., 2021, p.57).

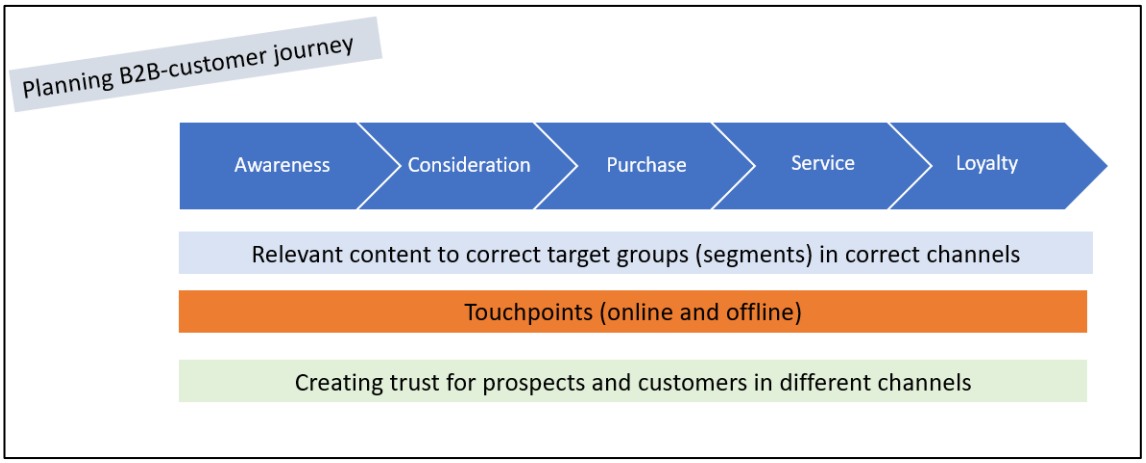

Figure 2. Elements of customer buying B2B-buying journey (modified from Zoltners et al. model, 2021, p. 57)

Social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for B2B sales professionals, enabling them to pinpoint leads, grasp buyer insights, nurture connections, and even cultivate a personal brand by consistently sharing compelling content across digital channels. Terho et al. (2022) define social selling as "a salesperson selling approach 'which leverages social channels for understanding, connecting with, and engaging influencers, prospects, and existing customers at relevant customer journey touchpoints for building valuable business relationships." (Terho et al., 2022.)

2.3 Digital sales force effectiveness

Digitalization is defined as "the use of technology, data, and analytics for designing and supporting business processes and decisions" (Zoltners et al., 2021, p. 87). With this definition, digitalization gives enormous opportunities to selling organizations.

Zoltners et al. (2021, p. 88) has introduced the framework of sales effectiveness (Figure 3). It includes five different components which are customer strategy, organization design, talent, channel, and customer engagement effectiveness drivers. The fifth component is supporting architecture. All these areas are not only for sales function to manage. The customer strategy and channel and

customer engagements are also marketing organizations' responsibilities. Also, Jobber & Landcaster (2006) introduces the digital tools which can improve salesforce effectiveness. Taking technology tools in use saves salespersons' time and improve productivity. Also, the customer can be helped easier, and the information is available more effective way. Due to salesforce automation software and digital tools the personal information and contact management becomes more convenient, and the tools enable more efficient selling such as lead and account management and win/loss reporting. (Jobber & Landcaster, 2006, 363−365; Zoltners et al., 2021; Zoltners et al., 2009.)

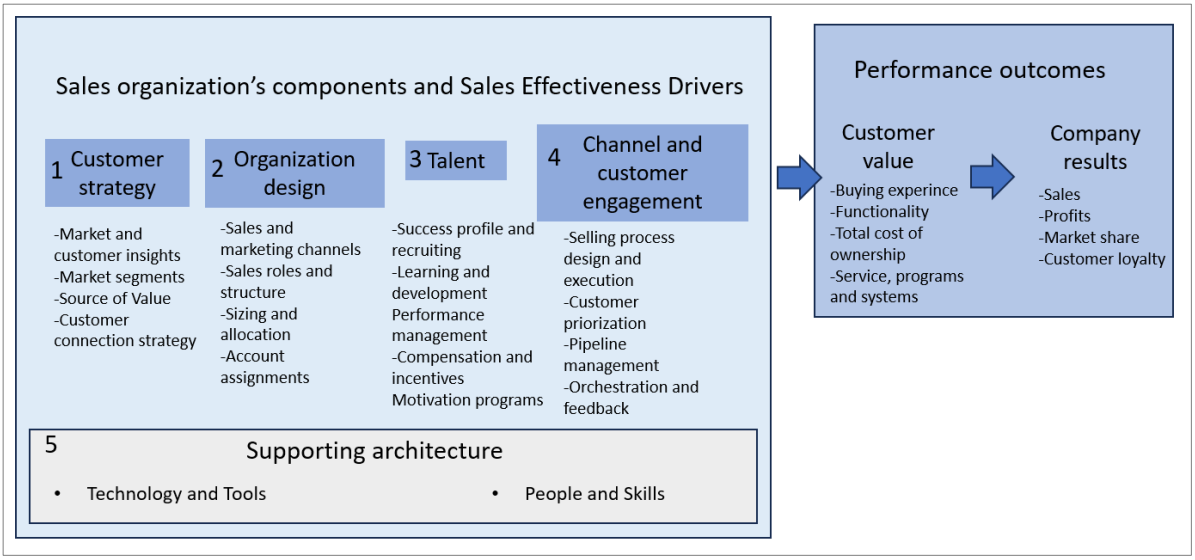

Figure 3. Sales effectiveness framework (adapted from Zoltners et al., 2021, p. 88)

Several sales decisions and process are included to sales effectiveness drivers. Customer strategy effectiveness drivers help the sales organization to concentrate to the most important priorities. It also includes areas which determinate who is selling to who, what kind of value to offer, and how to connect with prospects and customers to create mutual value (Zoltners et al., 2021). Organization design effectiveness drivers help the sales organization to create roles, sales channels, and structures that they can provide effective and efficient customer coverage. Talent effective drivers is helping the sales organization to recruit, develop, manage, and motivate the sales teams,

managers, leaders, and all other sales executives who have knowledge and skills to success in their roles. Channel and customer engagement effective drivers help the sales to implement customer strategy through integrated selling activities which are creating value for customers, stakeholders, and the company. Supporting architecture includes technology, tools and staff which provides support and resources for all the effectiveness drivers mentioned above. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Digitalization has relatively wide impact to sales effectiveness drivers. Zoltners et al. (2021) and Rangarajan et al. (2021) describe this in their studies. Digitalization covers automations, data platforms such as CRM (customer relationship management) systems, AI (artificial intelligence) tools and social media channels, for example. Selling personnel use digitalization to enhance the sales effectiveness drivers mainly for three reasons. First, they can supervise all gathered customer data with the help of digitalization. Second, the sales become more efficient and third, digitalization increase effectiveness. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Rangarajan et al., 2021.)

Rangarajan et al. (2021) highlight the importance of digitalization for customer perspective. For customer strategy and engagement, digitalization is bringing two enhanced possibilities. Those are making the data richer and blending the planning and execution. Richer data can be added to CRM systems to available for visibility and availability. Adding the richer data to CRM makes pipelines and sales processes more efficient. (Rangarajan et al., 2021.)

Blunt (2021), Kock & Rantala (2017) and Zoltners et al. (2021) all describe how digitalization has have an impact to sales processes and communication between the company and salespersons. For organization design, digitalization is affecting to sales channels and data and analytics are making the planning processes more continuous than previously. Digitalization enables sales organization to use emails, web shop, social media, and virtual meeting planforms. Also, customers can view independently company reviews, blogs, company information from web, and create a picture of the company’s products and services without interaction with salesperson. The digitalization has an

effect to sales organization and managing teams, for example. Territory design is no longer necessarily needed when meetings can be held virtually. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Kock & Rantala, 2017; Blunt, 2021.)

Talent part is supported by digitalization in several ways, too. The analytics is helping to set sales goals for sales personnel and supervising the results is also effective due to digital tools. Recently companies have started to take advantage of AI-based tools. Machine learning and AI can help sales to make decisions and aim the certain sales activities to certain salespersons. For example, the CRM platforms can estimate based on history data which salesperson should be selling to certain business fields. Also, automations and training platforms can help in sales onboarding and make the sales start more efficient. For example, automated emails to new sales representatives about their goal targets can motivate them to start making deals earlier. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Companies benefit from digitalization in their supporting architecture, where it gives opportunity to control sales and other operational areas with digital technology and different systems. CRM and analytics tools are examples how digital tools are affecting to supporting architecture. The digital tools also need the correct staff and skills to maintain and use the platforms correctly. Cross-functional skills such as analytics, technology and modern sales and marketing are required from the teams. Also, Zheng, Shi, Zhong, Tingchi & Lin (2023) describe that digital platforms and tools can support companies to follow their customers and prospects closely with the help of generated data, for example. This requires companies' managements to support in the implementation and using the new digital tools and make sure the salespersons, for example, has the needed knowledge and skills. (Zheng et al., 2023.)

Zoltners et al. (2021, p. 90) describe that sales digitalization success if appearing when the sales effectiveness drivers implement the planned performance outcomes. There is a conceptual model for sales digitalization success which is seen in Figure 4. The digitalization conceptual model includes

three themes from the literature. Those are digital readiness, adoption, and sustainability. (Zoltners et al. 2021; Zoltners et al. 2009.).

Organizational readiness means the action where organization is having processes and people in place to coordinate the efforts and communicate changes (Greeff and Ghoshal, 2004, p. 286). For sales digitalization readiness this means that the organization is making priorities between different digital initiatives and gets people with correct skills and knowledge to the roles. It is required from the teams that they are communicating across IT and other departments and are sharing the information. This has direct impact to companies' competitiveness. (Zoltners et al. 2021; Greeff & Ghoshal, 2004.)

Adoption is related to technology acceptance model (TAM) which indicated whether people are accepting the new technologies or not. TAM -model identify two factors, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of technology. For example, taking CRM systems in use by sales personnel is dependent on the supervisors and managers attitudes and examples of the company. In general, productivity, efficiency, excellent training, organizational support, market readiness and peer influence are factors that promote salespeople to start using and integrate the new digital platforms and tools. (Zoltners et al. 2021.)

Sustainability is about continuing the use of digital tools and giving the support when needed. The sustainability included ongoing evaluation which means that the processes, trainings, and cost-effectiveness need to be evaluated by the organization. It should also present the benefits of technology changes to sales continuously. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

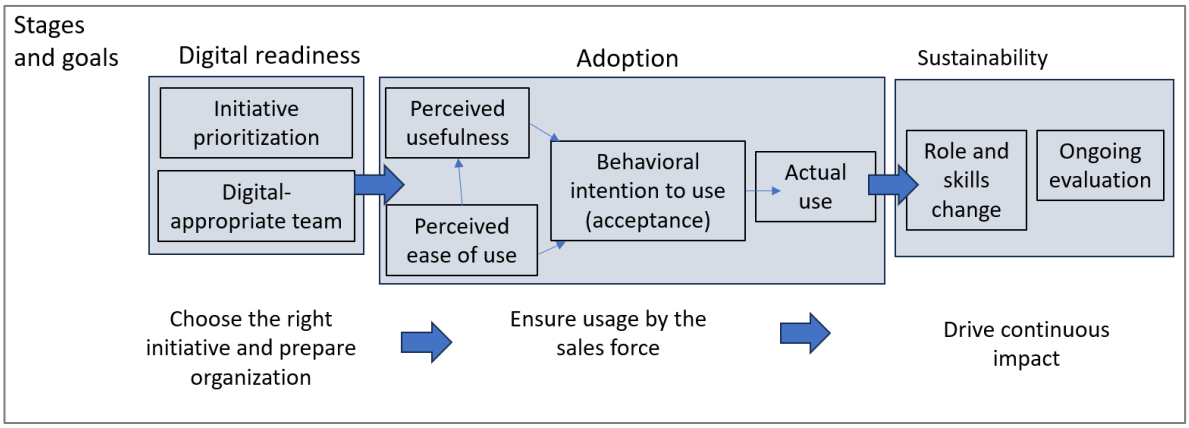

Figure 4. Conceptual model of sales digitalization success (adapted from Zoltners et al., 2021, p. 90)

2.4 Failure and promoting factors of digital sales effectiveness

Digitalization can be very challenging to sales. Zoltners et al. (2021) highlights the three main failure types when integrating digitalization to organizations. Those are slow progress, poor adoption, and low impact. They all include more specific factors which affect to the failure of digital sales projects. All failures Zoltners et al. (2021, p. 93) emphasize, and which are related to the conceptual model can be seen in the figure 5.

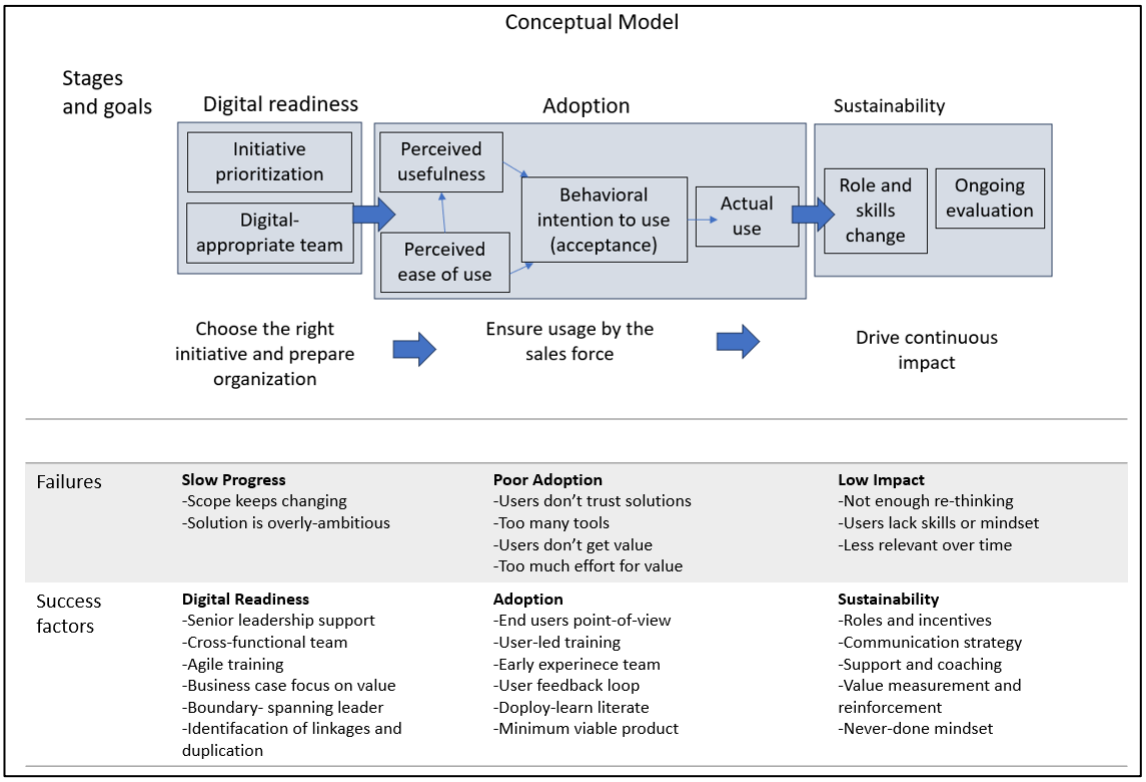

Figure 5. Failures and success factors related to sales digitalization (adopted from Zoltners et al., 2021, p. 93)

When considering the digital readiness phase of digital sales projects, bigger sales digital projects face more challenges than smaller ones. Slow progress of projects can lead to digital sales initiatives failure because the priorities keep changing and the target are unrealistic. During the sales digital projects, the scope changes and it might not be clear to every party of organization what is the project about. For some teams' digital sales means different things and without the common understanding of the scope the vision is changing and for that reason the progress is becoming slower. Also, when digital sales initiatives are large projects which have ambitious goals, it may happen that when the system ready to be taken into use some part needs to be re-design to achieve more efficient tool. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

In the adoption phase of sales digitalization and projects, trusting new technologies and tools of the users can lead to poor adoption of the digital projects of sales. Adoption suffers when the salespersons don't have enough

information of the new tools, or they feel that new systems are observing them too much. The salespeople need to be comfortable in using new digital tools or they may feel insecure and start rejecting the recommendations. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Venkatesan & Lecinski, 2021.)

In adoption phase of the sales digitalization process, it is also important that users are experiencing that they get enough value from digital tools. Value creation for sales via new tools is important and there is need from senior management to support them and communicate the value of new tools. The aim of the new technology is to make sales more efficient or effective, but if the salespersons are not getting the value new tools are not integrated to their daily use and they may experience that using the tools takes too much time but no value. It is also very challenging if there are many tools started to use at the same time. This technology overload causes stress and decreases sales performance. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Organizations may also use resources to sales digitalization tools which are adopted but have not been fully considered through. Resources can lack of skills and correct mindset which leads low impact on the sustainability phase of sales digitalization process. Organizations should consider the benefits and possibilities of the tools. For example, mobile responsiveness, user friendliness and data analyzing tools need to be planned carefully to get full potential for sales. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

When new digital solutions are implemented, it is important that the users have required skills. Salespersons can adopt new tools fast and for some it may take more time to start using platforms. As the customer buying process have been changing and digital tools are affecting to the customers' journeys, the new skills, attitudes, and mindsets are needs from salespersons. Since customer can receive more information via web sales representatives cannot dominate the sales process so much than earlier (Zoltners et al., 2021; Kock & Rantala, 2017). Customers are expected to be reach through digital channels such as email, rather than face to face. This leads to a situation where salespeople are required to take many different roles and accept new ways of working. Those

needs are within the teams and sales management. Also, Vekantesan & Lecinski (2021) emphasize the relevance of correct skills and mindset for employees when implementing new digital tools for sales. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Kock & Rantala, 2017; Venkatesan & Lecinski, 2021.)

In the sales digitalization's sustainability phase, the last factor which may cause failure in the process is that the solution becomes less relevant over time. If there is the need to improve customer experiences and sales effectiveness, but the platforms remain the same, the initiative loses focus even there are requirements to improve. There are several reasons why the relevancy is low. For example, according to the local needs some roles or approaches need to be changed but the systems cannot be modified if there is a platform used globally. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Several success factors contribute to readying the organization for success. These encompass delineating the scope and priority of a digital sales initiative, alongside assembling a team equipped for digital endeavors. All success factors Zoltners et al. (2021, p. 93) highlight can be seen in the figure 5. They are strongly related to same areas with conceptual model which are digital readiness, adoption, and sustainability.

The engagement of executives correlates with a company's forward-looking utilization of information technology. Senior leaders are tasked with instilling a shared vision, identifying suitable leaders, mobilizing essential resources, and tackling organizational challenges. Significant digital initiatives typically prompt role modifications and power redistributions among various managerial functions such as sales, IT, marketing, and sales operations. Senior leaders play a pivotal role in fostering consensus across organizational divisions and resolving conflicts that arise as a result. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

In any digital initiative, the success or failure often hinges on the leadership of the team driving the effort. The most significant predictor of success, according to Zoltners et al. (2021), is the profile of the individual leading the charge, with a boundary spanner being identified as the optimal leader. Boundary-spanning

leaders bridge the gap between business and IT communities, promoting collaboration while maintaining discipline. They understand the priorities of both sides: business stakeholders seek innovation and results, while IT focuses on cost control, risk management, and long-term sustainability. Boundary spanners facilitate alignment between these potentially conflicting priorities during technology selection and platform implementation. They also ensure that user value and fit remain central during design and deployment phases, leveraging their experience to navigate different instincts effectively. Ultimately, boundary spanners play a critical role in guiding digital initiatives towards successful outcomes. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Building digital solutions necessitates a collaborative effort, drawing upon a diverse cross-functional team comprising experts in programming, data analysis, business development, software architecture, project management, and user experience. The balanced utilization of varied skills leads to success, as exemplified by data scientists generating insights beneficial to the sales team, while engineers ensure the feasibility and sustainability of implementation. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Given the varying impacts of digitalization across customer-facing functions and specialized roles, representation from diverse viewpoints is crucial within cross-functional teams. Effective coordination, cooperation, and communication across silos of expertise are imperative at every stage of the digital journey, necessitating skilled leadership preferably from a boundary spanner to foster collaboration and a collective sense of purpose. Also, Venkatesan & Lecinski (2021) underline that communication is one of the most favorable features when implementing digital tools and platforms to organization. Effective communication between the core team and users, coupled with comprehensive user training, fosters a shared belief in the digital solution, thereby enhancing technology acceptance. Communication strategies should be established early in the project and maintained beyond the launch, considering factors such as content, timing, delivery personnel, and format, while striking a balance to avoid

both under-communication and over-communication. (Zoltners et al., 2021; Venkatesan & Lecinski, 2021.)

In ensuring the success of digital initiatives, it's essential for solution design, development, and deployment to progress in harmony. Adopting agile methodology, though potentially unfamiliar, requires training to instill the necessary mindset and tools for effective execution. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

In agile development, the minimum viable product (MVP) plays a crucial role. It comprises only essential features necessary to address real business use cases. The MVP serves three primary purposes: it enables rapid implementation within weeks or months, maintains simplicity while ensuring impact, and guides the solution's evolution through continuous user feedback, thereby fostering adoption. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Effective early engagement testing (EET) holds significance within agile development practices. Unlike traditional pilot testing, EET involves an initial subset of users from the MVP solution, emphasizing their crucial role in shaping the final product. By elevating early users to frontier adopters, EET ensures ownership of the solution from the outset, facilitating continuous feedback. Optimal EET participants represent the broader sales team, not just tech-savvy individuals. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

In agile methodology, work progresses through iterative cycles known as sprints, with each sprint focusing on fixed scope while adapting future plans based on feedback. Small cross-functional teams collaborate during sprints, maintaining urgency with short timelines for deliverables. Following MVP release to the EET, quick release cycles enable rapid incorporation of user feedback, facilitating swift evolution towards full-scale rollout. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

User training and support are critical components for enhancing sales force automation effectiveness. Effective training programs prioritize business process and skillset changes over tool-specific knowledge. For example, one company's deployment of a digital coaching system emphasized practical

training sessions where sales managers utilized data and analytics for coaching, fostering reliance on objective insights rather than legacy knowledge. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Apart from enhancing digital proficiency, sales force members may need to adapt to fundamental role transformations within an interconnected network of sales roles and channels to effectively cater to increasingly informed customers. Consequently, adjustments in hiring profiles, training programs, and performance management systems may be necessary to equip sales teams with the requisite teamwork and orchestration skills. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

To secure the commitment of salespeople, senior leaders can emphasize the motivational aspects of change. However, sensitive topics, such as systems that reduce salespeople's control, may necessitate a cascade communication strategy involving immediate supervisors or peer influencers to effectively propagate the message. Successful implementations prioritize aligning first-line sales managers with project objectives and digitalization implications. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

While initial training aids users in getting started, ongoing support and coaching are essential for driving sustained adoption, with peer influencers and members of the early engagement testing (EET) group serving as effective evangelists' post-deployment. Defining success in quantifiable terms and establishing mechanisms for measurement and reinforcement are crucial for sustaining success and redirecting focus towards diagnosis and course correction in case of setbacks. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Despite digitalization providing an information substrate for organizations, the underlying technology continually evolves with each wave of innovation, presenting new opportunities to refine sales decisions and processes. Consequently, long-term success demands a shift from viewing digital initiatives as projects towards adopting a mindset of perpetual readiness and evolution, where solutions are "always ready, but never done." (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

Venkatesan & Lecinski (2021) highlight that the areas such as personnel and procedures. As a leader, it's insufficient to simply state broad intentions like "Our organization must change" or "AI needs more focus in marketing" (Venkatesan et al., 2021, p. 181). The roles entail spearheading a transformation from manual marketing to AI-driven marketing and sales, addressing key aspects: personnel, procedures, ethos, and financial outcomes.

Venkatesan and Lecinski (2021) highlight several same factors related to digital sales which can affect positively to digital sales force effectiveness. Those are project management expertise, comfortability on all areas and across the teams, excellent communication skills, ability to be self-starter, to have naturally collaborative and relationship-building skills, agile friendliness, and persistence. These characteristics are partly same Zoltners et al. (2021) are describing. (Zoeltners, 2021; Venkatesan & Lecinski, 2021.)

3 Research method

3.1 Research design

The incorporation of a literature review holds a pivotal position within the scope of research. Primarily, it equips the researcher with an understanding of the practical intricacies associated with the chosen problem. Secondly, it necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the most recent insights pertaining to the relevant theory underlying the topic (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 45). Moreover, it mandates an extensive discussion of the topic, drawing connections to pertinent theories and prior research endeavors. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016.)

In qualitative research, the focus of data collection and analysis centers around social and cultural contexts, aiming to attain a comprehensive grasp of the research problem. In the realms of social science and business, qualitative research has long served as the primary phase, often followed by subsequent quantitative studies. Moreover, qualitative research has been instrumental in gaining insights into issues that are not readily solvable through quantitative means. Nonetheless, conducting qualitative research independently, devoid of any association with quantitative research, remains a feasible approach. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016.)

To get a deeper understanding of the digital sales effectiveness and research different experiences of sales directors from different cases, this study has a qualitative research approach.

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with Sales Directors provides valuable insights into the subjective experiences and perceptions of experiences in the digital sales effectiveness. Also, this study has been implemented with interviews because it gives richer picture of the sales directors' own experiences and views. Comparing to a form of questions and sending it to the target group via email would not give the needed data for this

study since it was required that people are interviewed in person to receive the authentic stories from the interviews.

To gather targeted insights from the involved stakeholders in the case, the research methodology of choice centered on qualitative interviewing. Specifically, interviews served as the primary means of data collection, offering a practical and effective approach for accessing information not readily available in published sources (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 80−81). The objective is to extract data from different stakeholders which are affecting to sales personnel. Qualitative interviews emerged as the most suitable technique, providing a wealth of recent and pertinent data for subsequent analysis, while ensuring a 100 percent response rate for the questions. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016.)

According to Warren (2011), a qualitative interview is essentially a conversational exchange, where researchers pose questions and actively listen, while the interviewees construct meaning through their responses. Participants are regarded as meaning makers, actively contributing to the interpretative process, rather than merely offering preconceived answers. The purpose of these qualitative interviews lies in generating interpretations based on the dialogue with the respondents, aiming to comprehend their experiences and life perspectives. (Warren, 2011.)

Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 91) further underscore that the primary goal of qualitative interviews is to yield data pertinent to the research objectives. Distinguishing itself from everyday conversations, the qualitative interview involves meticulous preparation by the researcher, with a deliberate focus on the research topic and related inquiries driving the course of the conversation. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Warren, 2011.)

Through engagement with participants from private sector, as well as other relevant stakeholders, the research gives valuable insights into distinctive experiences, expectations, and practices.

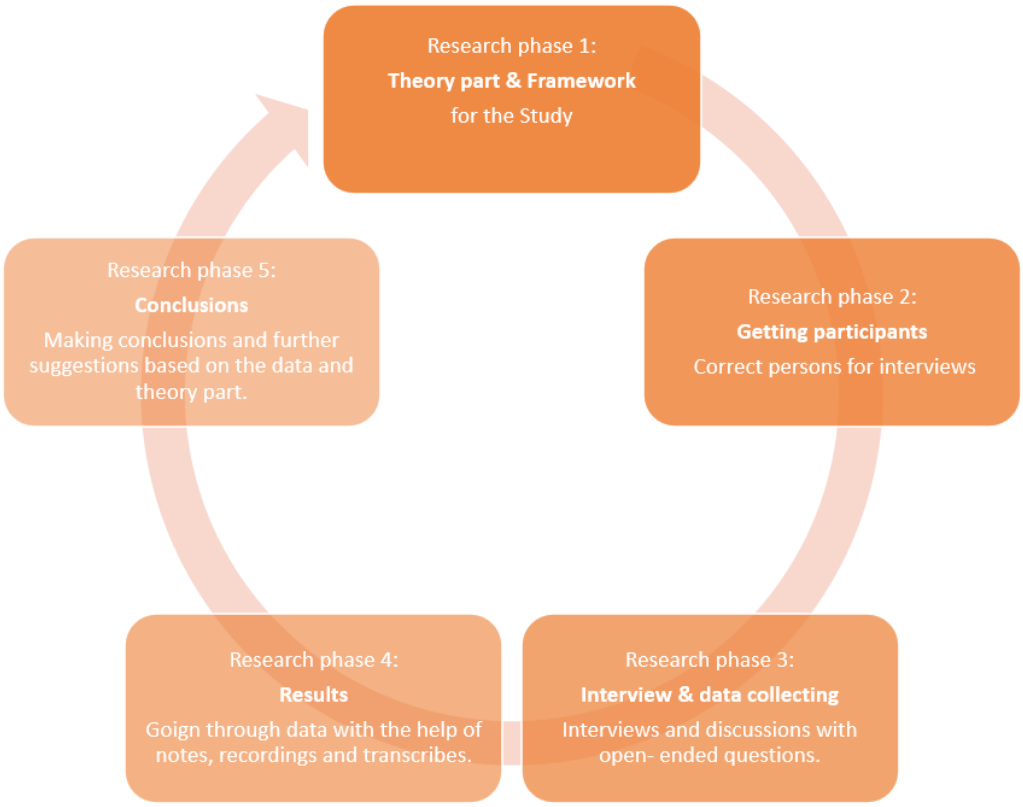

Figure 6. Research design overview.

The research design overview (Figure 6) sums up the process of the study. It simplifies different activities, steps and participants required for the implementation.

3.2 Data collection

In this study, the material analysis is based on the data which was collected from ten (10) sales director who operates in different sizes of businesses. With this data the study can be completed and reflected to the theories presented.

Each respondent had experience in implementing and using digital sales tools and also leading the projects. Most had been involved in implementing CRM

tools and developing them for sales teams. Some interviewees had also been involved in projects related to data, such as social selling or data enrichment.

Based on the interviews, all ten sales managers possess extensive experience in sales work and sales management. Each had at least 13 years of work experience in one or more companies. Each works or has worked in an industry that offers products or services to the B2B sector. The interviewees worked in both national and international companies. The detailed information can be seen in the table 1.

The questions of the interviews can be divided into two areas: general questions about salespersons background and the field of the company they are working in, and experiences related to some specific digital tool provided to sales. Latter area's questions are focusing on the digital sales effectiveness, promoting and failure factors, especially to digital readiness, adoption, sustainability, slow progress, poor adaptation, and low impact. The aims of these open-ended questions are to receive, and deeper understanding of what factors are affecting to digital sales effectiveness and what are the failure and success factors when implementing new digital tools for sales. All questions and detailed statements are seen in the Appendix 1.

Through interviews with ten experienced sales directors conducted in April 2024, this research aims to uncover the promoters and barriers influencing the success or failure of digital sales initiatives. The participants for the interviews were selected through the author's network. There was a post in LinkedIn social media platform which included the introductions of the study and criteria which kind of salespersons were wanted to participate. The criteria were that salespersons should be in a leading position and from the businesses which are from more traditional fields and related to B2B service or product providers. Modern technology, digital and SaaS -companies, for example, were left out. This was because the commissioner of the study is on the field of office supplies and solutions and the participants wanted to be from similar businesses. However, the competitors of the commissioner were also left out. The respondents are numbered and title, business field they operate today, and

experience of sales can be seen from the Table 1. Even the title varies, they are all considered as the directors of sales and sales leaders in their own organizations.

Table 1. Background information of the respondents

Respondent	Title	Business field	Experience in Sales
1	Sales Director	Accounting Services for B2B	15 years
2	Sales Director	Construction Planning services for B2B	15-20 years
3	Country Manager	Facility services to B2B	15 years
4	Sales Director	Property Management Services to B2B	20 years
5	Sales Director	HR-services to B2B	20 years
6	Sales Director	Accounting services for B2B	20 years
7	CEO	Facility Services for B2B	20 years
8	Key Account Manager	Electric devices and services for B2B	13 years
9	Sales Director	Office products and Services for B2B	25 years
10	Sales Director	Office products and Services for B2B	20 years

The data was collected via Teams meetings which were recorded and transcribed. Also, memos were written during the interviews. The interviews' structure included both more general questions and detailed statements which were related to failure and success factors of digital sales effectiveness model. The questions and statements can be seen from the Appendix 1. The general questions were related to Sales Directors' background, working history, different

roles of sales and participation of digital tool implementations. The detailed statements were related to more specific focus about the digital projects such as customer database, pipelines, social selling, prospects' data, and AI. In the detailed statements the answers were given with Likert-model, which is one of the most used formats in questionnaires (Babbie, 2010). The model gives opportunity to answer between "strongly agree", "somewhat agree", "somewhat disagree" and "strongly disagree". These answer option leaves more vague answers out and is also easier for interviewees. These kinds of answers are related to statements which are asked after general questions. (Babbie, 2010.)

To get the best understanding about the Sales Directors' experiences, the data is also collected with the more detailed statements. The more detailed statements are asked to answer with Likert-model, which gives the interviewees to answer on four steps scale, where 1 means "totally disagree", 2 means "somewhat disagree", 3 means "somewhat agree" and 4 means "totally agree".

3.3 Data analysis

This study delves into the dynamics of digital sales effectiveness by examining the experiences and perspectives of sales directors involved in projects related to CRM, customer communication tools, such as chatbots and lead generation or social selling platforms. Additionally, there are also tools which helps sales teams to rich the data of their prospects and customers.

After all interviews the notes and recordings were gone through again and similarities in the descriptions and answers were matched. For example, if some Sales Directors' have answered similar way, using similar words or sentences, those answers were highlighted. To get more general views and clear picture of the interviewees' experiences this coding method was required. The coding led to be able to make further conclusions based on the collected data.

In the coding method, the raw data from interviews is changed more to general form. With the help of coding method, it is possible to collect similarities from recordings and written notes. This gives more general overview of the sales

directors' experiences and data can be handled easier. When there are similarities in the terms and in wording the conclusions between practice and theoretical perspective are easier implemented. (Babbie, 2010.)

4 Results

4.1 Factors influencing to digital sales effectiveness

All ten Sales Directors answered to all questions and detailed statements. This means that with personal interviews it was possible to reach answer to all asked questions. All the answers and evaluation overview can be seen in the Appendix 2.

The detailed statements were created according to the factors which are promoting the digital sales effectiveness or leading to a failure with these kinds of projects. They were related to slow progress, poor adoption, low impact, digital readiness, adoption, and sustainability, which are strongly related to Zoltners et al. (2021) model of digital sales effectiveness. All these mentioned categories included two, three or four questions.

Key results from the interviews highlight the importance of local-level implementation support which is related to digital readiness-factor, user-centric tool development which is related to low impact -factor, realistic project targets which was related to slow progress, and the role of external project coordinators in facilitating smooth adoption of digital sales tools. That is related to digital readiness.

In general, when compared all the statements, the highest disagreement was with the statement “Incentives were provided to support the achievement of goals related to the use of the new tool” and the most agreed statement “The new tool is long-lasting and can be utilized in the long term relative to expectations and goals.” Both statements were related to sustainability factor.

Unrealistic project targets were cited as a major hindrance to successful implementation. Overly ambitious goals coupled with broad tool functionalities often led to frustration among sales teams, undermining their willingness to embrace change and adopt new digital tools. Unrealistic targets were related to slow progress.

Based on the respondents' answers, slow progress was experienced in several companies. This can be seen in the figure 7. Some Sales Directors stated that when the tools were stated to taken into use for sales team, most of the respondents described that the tool which was already used in some other countries of the same Group, was given for use without any development of local needs taken into consideration. In some companies the tools and platforms did not fit for every team, and they could be used only partly. One Sales Director described that "*the tool was developed for other market in the Group and just given to our organization. It couldn't be used by all different sales teams we had, and the further development took altogether six years to start using it properly.*" (Respondent 2.)

Also, some companies couldn't use the given tools, such as CRM, at all. During the research, only two Sales Directors confirmed that the implementations went smoothly according to the plans and that the tools were ready to be used as the purpose and targets. "*First, the whole sales team started to consider what the need for the new CRM was and then we stated the project. We also collaborated with an external service provider to get the proper tool already at the first place.*" (Respondent 6.)

Related the statement "Overly ambitious/unrealistic goals affected the project's progress relative to expectations and goals", the Sales Directors had relatively same opinion about that. All of them were clarifying that the scope did not change during the implementations and that the expectations were realistic.

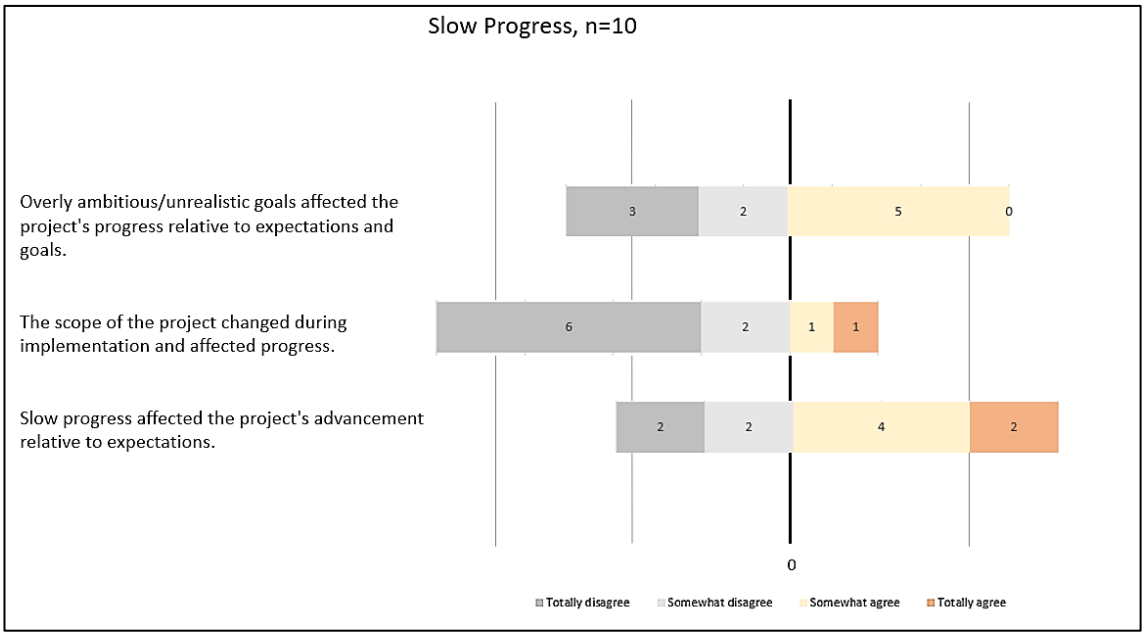

Figure 7. Evaluation of Slow Progress

When it comes to evaluation of poor adoption, it seemed to be the most affected agreed statements. Evaluation of poor adoption can be seen in the figure 8. The attitude of sales teams and individual salespersons played a pivotal role in the adoption of digital tools. Resistance to change and skepticism regarding the added value of new tools posed significant challenges, particularly when the perceived benefits did not outweigh the perceived costs in terms of time and effort. Some Sales Directors described how the motivation towards using the new tool decreases if it is more time consuming, the idea of the new tool is missing and the sales teams does not know why they should be using it, or if the appropriate training is missing. From the figure 8, according to the Sales Directors experiences, the trust of the employees for the new digital tool were not on high level in most of the cases, and that's why the "somewhat agree" answer, was the most answered.

In those two cases where the digital tool implementation was success, the sales teams trusted the new tool very much. That led to the regular usage of the tools and adopting the new CRM tools as part of sales daily work.

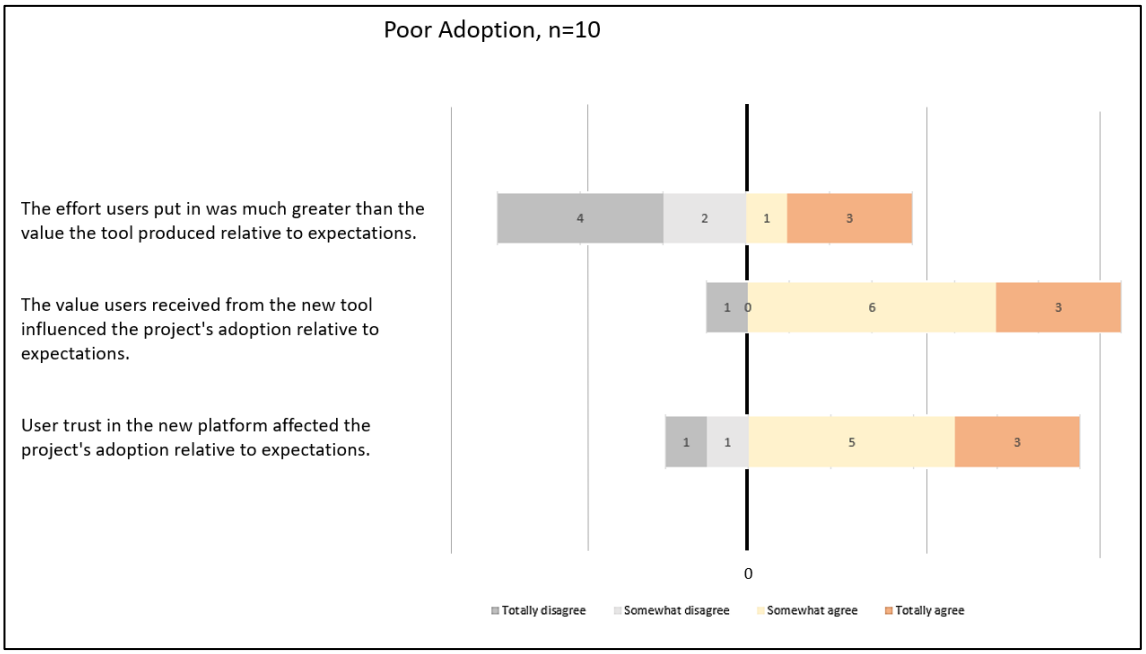

Figure 8. Evaluation of Poor Adoption

From the figure 9 it is seen that the correct mindset got the most “somewhat disagree” answers from the respondents which is an average grade if compared to all statements. The data from the interviews revealed that some of the salespersons were missing the correct mindset to adapt the new digital tools for sales. There were several reasons mentioned, such as attitudes towards modern tools, old habits, and policies. Also, age was mentioned during the discussions for the reason related to mindset. “*It was seen, that for senior sales leaders like me and to my colleagues, using the new digital tools were not as easy as for younger employees*”, described one Sales Director (Respondent 3.)

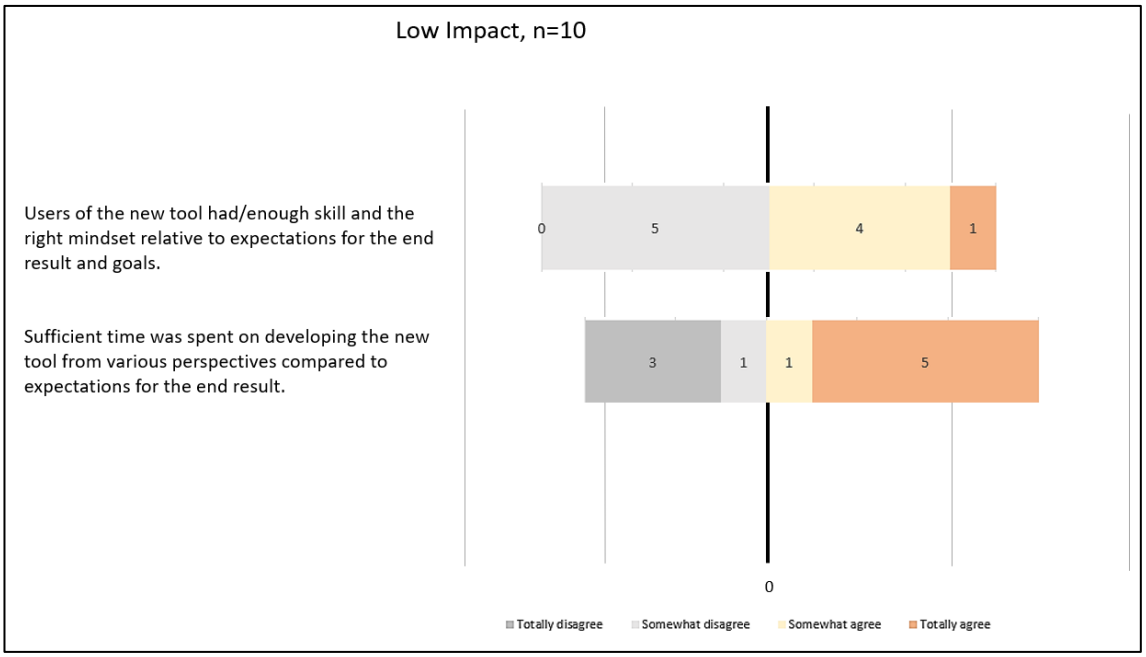

Figure 9. Evaluation of Low Impact

Evaluations to digital readiness-related questions can be seen from the figure 10. The statement about the training and agility got most “disagree” and “somewhat disagree” answers. In the interviews it was recognized that most of the sales directors felt that the management give full support to the digital projects and sales teams, but it was rather mentally supporting, not concrete resource on local level. It was also highlighted several times by different Sales Directors that local support which could have been helping with concrete implementation and practical trainings, were missing.

A common observation among the Sales Directors was the significance of local-level support in driving successful implementation. This is related to digital readiness which consider training and development of the implementation. The evaluation for digital readiness can be seen in the figure 10. In the specific statements the questions were related to working groups and project leaders, agility, and comprehensiveness of training and senior-level support. The results from the respondents show that when it comes to agile and comprehensive training, they rather disagree than agree. When asked about the multidisciplinary working group and project leader they agree more than disagree. This is also the case when asked about the management support.

Larger projects often faced hurdles in adaptation at the local level, where the lack of dedicated support and guidance impeded effective utilization of digital tools. During an interviews one Sales Director said that "*concrete support locally and developing the tool for local purposes were really helpful in implementation.*" (Respondent 6.)

The results revealed that in the cases where there was an external project coordinator working with the company sales representative and other employees, the digital projects were very successful. One Sales Director described:

"*It was not only that they brought knowhow and expertise of certain platform to our team and organization, but they also had more authority to get salespersons to use the new tool*".

Additionally, another Sales Director described:

"*We started to plan the new CRM tool as a team and there was external service provider with us already from the beginning which leaded to successful digital adaption.*" (Respondent 2.)

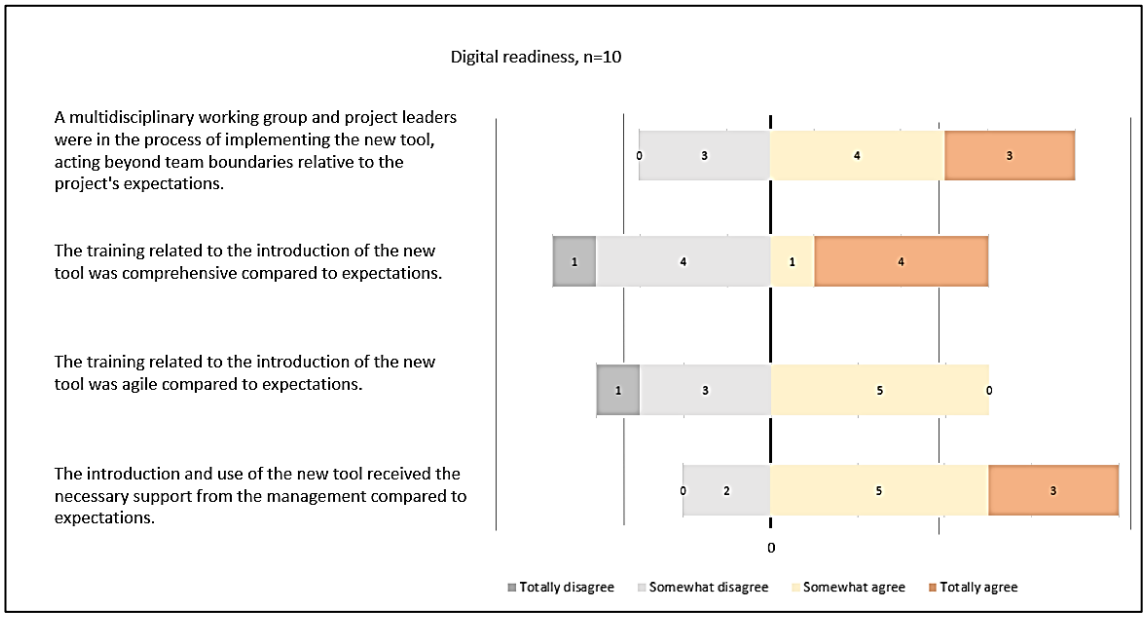

Figure 10. Evaluation of Digital Readiness

Related to the adoption factor in the digital sales projects, the figure 11 shows that there is evaluation of acceptance-related statements. Altogether this category got relatively good results because most of the respondents were answering “totally agree” for the questions which were related to the sustainability. As the results, the interviews revealed that in the most companies the feedback was collected but the development based on the feedback was not accomplished.

From the figure 11 it can be seen that the “totally agree” was the most answered when asking the adoption of the implementation of the new digital tools for sales. That answer covered the half of all answers. In relation the project goals, it seems that there was feedback collected and that there were test groups using the tools before the tools were launched to all.

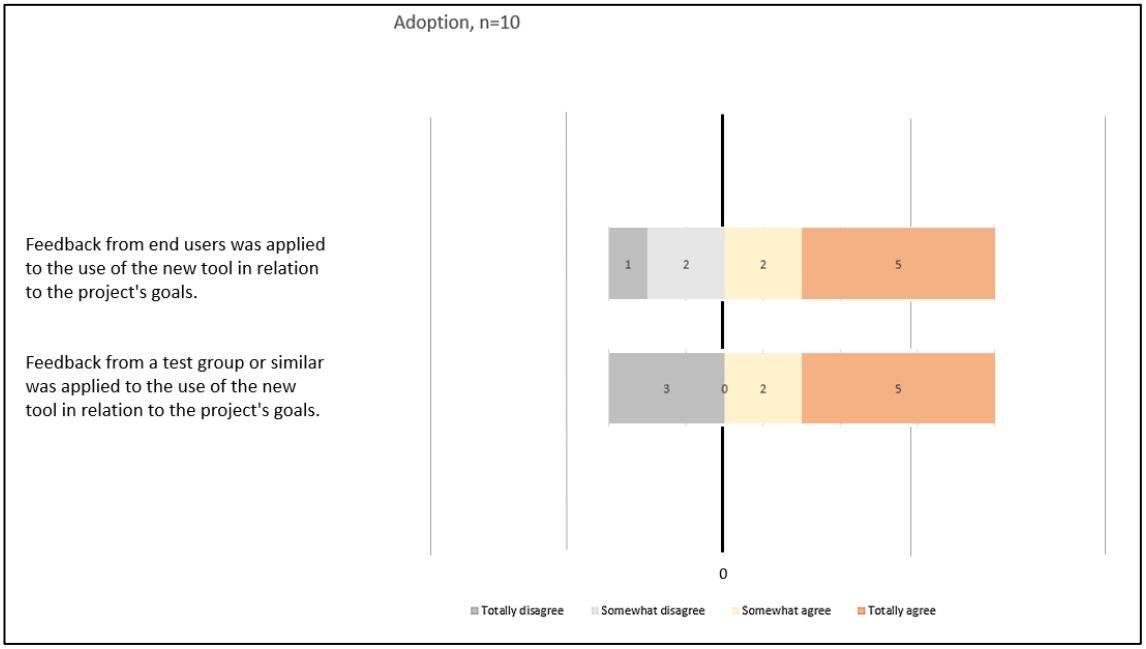

Figure 11. Evaluation of Adoption

It can be seen from the data that the sustainability matters were graded the most agreed by the sales directors. This can be seen from the figure 12. All of them had an opinion that the digital tools were given and aimed to use long time and they would have last time. This means that almost all digital sales tool wan

estimated to be used years. Also, Zoltners et al. (2021) highlights that in their model.

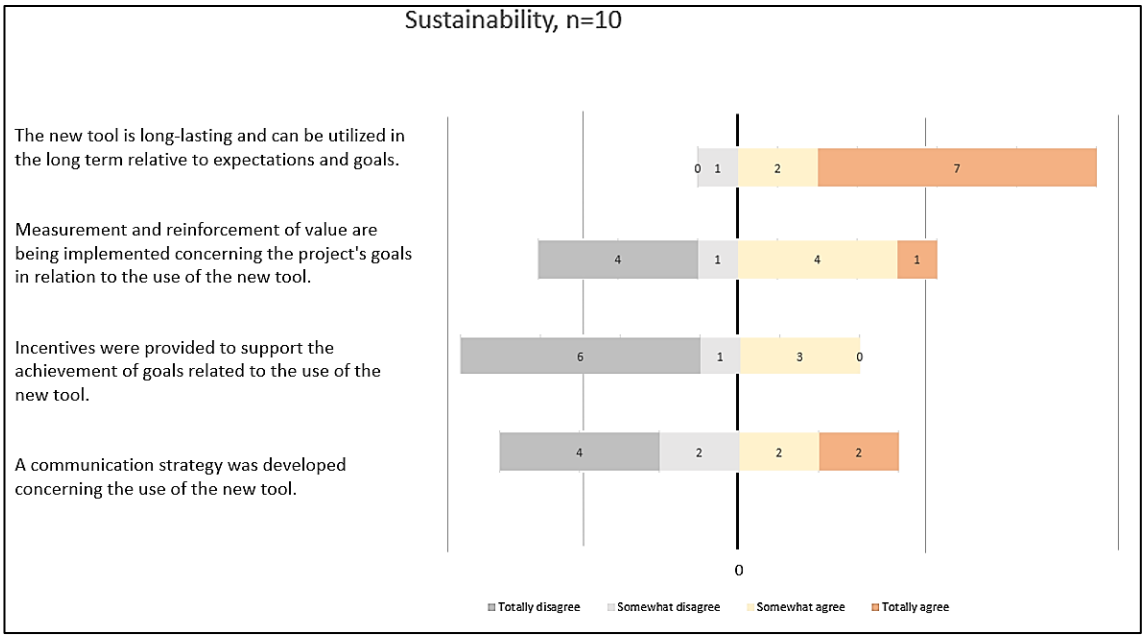

Figure 12. Evaluation of Sustainability

For the general questions the coding method was used. When using the coding method there were similarities which should be noted in this study.

Two sales directors mentioned that new digital tools should be seen as the daily tools which can make the sales more efficient, not tools which are seen a supervising tools for management. This idea should be changed already in the beginning of the communication and support of the senior teams. One sales director stated:

"*There is a need for open mindset where salespeople should be open to new tools that they would see themselves using them on daily basis, not as a tool which the top management can supervise.*" (Respondent 3.)

Based on the collected data, it was also seen that in the organization the policies related to using the common tools are not clear. This leads to situations where new CRM tools, for example, are using only by some of the salespeople, not all salespersons. A few respondents described that it should be the policy of the companies that everybody uses the same programs similarly, providing that

the tool has been developed to serve everybody needs accordingly. One sales director who has been in several different digital project described it like this:

"*I think that 'positive forcing' to use digital tools is the way the organizations should go because then all in sales are doing same things."* (Respondent 3.)

The findings from the interviews reveals that support on local level of implementation, user, centric development of the tools, realistic project targets, end-users' attitudes and mindsets, perceived value, management support and external project coordinators seems to have the most impact when implementing digital tools for sales.

Also, many other sales directors highlighted that today it is very important that salespeople are open minded and curios towards new digital tools.

When discussing with the respondents, following terms were repeated:

- **Local support**. This term was highlighted when discussing the implementation of digital tools for sales. The term was mentioned in the context what could have been done differently or better in the phase of implementation. It can be linked to digital readiness factor.
- **Attitudes against new tools and change**. This term was mentioned several times when discussing about implementation and asked about the challenges related to digital projects. It can be linked to low impact factor.
- **Meeting the correct needs of sales teams.** This term was mentioned several times when discussing about implementation and asked about the challenges related to digital projects. This theme can be linked to poor adoption.
- **Benefits and value for sales**. This term was mentioned several times when discussing the attitudes and adaptation of new tools for sales teams. This can be linked to poor adoption.
- **Curiosity.** This was the word mentioned several times when asked what kind of skills or features are needed in the future sales teams. This term can be linked to low impact factor which consider the correct mindset.

- **Open and adaptable**. This was the word mentioned several times when asked what kind of skills or features are needed in the future sales teams. This term can be linked to low impact factor and the correct mindset.
- **Mapping of the current state**. This was repeated when discussing the starting point of the digital projects for sales. It is worth mention that this term was related only those cases the implementations were very successful. This theme can be linked to digital readiness and development group.

4.2 Reliability, validity, and the limitations of the study

When going through the results it is noted that there are reliability and validity matters related to this study. This study's research is based on the group of altogether ten people's experiences and perspectives. The more people participating to the interviews, the more accurate data would be available. (Babbie, 2010.)

This study has also a few limitations. Those are related to the scope, data, methodology and resources.

The scope of the study is in the digital sales effectiveness and the factors promoting or slowing down digitalization projects in sales teams. This study has specific boundaries of the research such as interviews implemented during the April 2024. The findings may not be applicable outside of these defined parameters.

There are also data limitations, which are including ten sales director's own experiences and views. This means the data is collected only from specific group of people. Data may also acknowledge the potential impact of these limitations on the reliability or generalizability of the findings.

The study is implemented using qualitative technique with open ended and closed questions. The method may limit the research design or data analysis.

According to the interviews, all ten sales managers have significant expertise in both sales roles and sales management, with each possessing a minimum of 13 years of professional experience across one or more companies. They have all been employed in industries providing products or services to the B2B sector and have experience working in both national and international firms.

Every interviewee has experience with the implementation and utilization of digital sales tools. The majority have been involved in the adoption and enhancement of CRM tools for sales teams. Additionally, some have participated in data-related projects, including social selling and data enrichment initiatives. These matters also limit the study.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Synthesis of the findings

In the rapidly evolving sales industry, organizations are increasingly turning to digital tools to improve efficiency, streamline processes and increase revenue. The fast development of digital tools and Covid-19 has affected to the customer journeys and decision-making processes. However, the effectiveness of these digital initiatives often depends on many factors, such as user acceptance, local support, and alignment with organizational goals. This study seeks to explore the complex experiences of sales leaders in digital sales projects, focusing on the digital sales effectiveness and the factors which are promoting or leading to failure in digital projects.

Different studies reveal that a significant portion, up to 60%, of the decision-making process occurs prior to the first sales meeting. This underscores the urgency for organizations to establish a strong digital presence and engage potential clients early in their decision-making journey. By doing so, companies can not only influence the decision-making process but also position themselves as trusted advisors capable of addressing the diverse needs and concerns of modern buyers.

This study also proofs the statements of Venkatesan & Lecinski (2021) valid. In the survey it was noted project management expertise, comfortability on all areas and across the teams, excellent communication skills, ability to be self-starter, to have naturally collaborative and relationship-building skills, agile friendliness, and persistence skills are required when the implementation of digital tools for sales success (Venkatesan & Lecinski, 2021).

5.1.1 Factors effect to digital sales effectiveness

It can be seen very clearly that Zoltners' et al. (2021) model of digital sales effectiveness and the data collected to this study can be related when factors

which are affecting to the digitalization of sales are researched. Zoltners' et al. (2021) model describes the factors which are needed to take into consideration when implementing new digital tools to sales and how the implementation should be done that the project is not leading to failure. In the theory they also focus on the promotional factors which lead to successful projects and can make organizations' sales more effective and efficiency. (Zoltners et al., 2021.)

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of digital sales effectiveness, highlighting the interplay between organizational support, user attitudes, and project management strategies. By prioritizing local-level support, user-centric design, realistic goal-setting, and external expertise, organizations can enhance the success rate of digital sales initiatives and drive sustainable growth in the digital era. The findings show that Zoltners et al. (2021) digital sales force effectiveness and the factors which are promoting or slowing down the implementations are connected both on theory- and practical-level. This study shows there are now proofs from real life about the factors influencing these kinds of projects and how companies can avoid them.

As a conclusion, the findings of this study, based on interviews with ten Sales Directors, underscore the relevance and applicability of Zoltners et al., (2021) framework in understanding and enhancing digital sales effectiveness. The data gleaned from these interviews vividly illustrates how factors identified by Zoltners et al., (2021) digital readiness, sustainability, and easy adaption, are pivotal in shaping the dynamics of contemporary sales environments.

In addition, the study reinforces the notion that Zoltners et al. (2021) framework for digital sales effectiveness provides a comprehensive roadmap for organizations seeking to thrive in today's increasingly digitized marketplace. By embracing concepts such as digital readiness, sustainability, and easy adaption, businesses can not only navigate the challenges of contemporary sales environments but also emerge as leaders in their respective industries. Using the power of digital technologies and effectively engage customers across digital channels will be instrumental in driving long-term success and growth in the digital age.

Furthermore, the study underscores the critical importance for companies to focus on digital sales effectiveness considering the increasingly digital nature of the customer journey. With today's consumers engaging with businesses through several digital touchpoints, the ability to leverage digital channels effectively becomes vital. This is further compounded by the reality that B2B sales involve a multitude of decision-makers, often ranging from six to eight individuals. Consequently, it becomes imperative for companies to proactively engage these decision-makers with relevant digital content and marketing initiatives well before the first sales contact.

5.1.2 Factors promoting the digital sales force effectiveness

The success of digital tools heavily relied on their alignment with the needs and preferences of end-users, particularly sales professionals. Projects that prioritized user feedback and tailored the tool's features accordingly experienced smoother adoption and higher satisfaction among sales teams.

While top management support was acknowledged as essential, its effectiveness varied depending on the level of engagement at the local level. Projects that received concrete support and resources at the local level demonstrated higher levels of success in implementation and adoption. Also, the results show that concrete training was mentioned and very needed matter according to the Sales Directors.

Zoltners et al. (2021) emphasis on digital readiness resonates strongly with the study, revealing how companies that prioritize technological agility and integration are better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern markets. Similarly, the concept of sustainability highlights the enduring value of strategies that foster long-term relationships and customer loyalty in an era defined by rapid change and fierce competition. Moreover, the imperative of easy adaption underscores the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in aligning sales strategies with evolving customer needs and preferences.

The value of both MVP, minimal viable products, and EET, early experience team, would be beneficial for companies who are taking steps towards digitalization. In the theory part MVP and EET are essentials for agile development and considered to be crucial and key factors to be successful in digital sales force effectiveness. The companies should be using them as a tool in digital implementation projects. In addition, companies would have a great banefit using Zoltners' et al. checklist for successful sales, which covers readiness, adoption, and sustainability in the phases of enablement, approach, team and business case review (Zoltners et al., 2021).

It is worth to mention that those cases which were experienced very successful projects, there was external local support present in the projects. The presence of external project coordinators emerged as a facilitator of successful implementation, with their expertise and authority lending credibility and support to the adoption process. Sales teams were more receptive to guidance and training provided by external professionals, leading to smoother transitions and greater acceptance of digital tools. From the theory part this is related to adaption and sustainability.

These arguments were given by the sales directors which gave the best evaluations to their CRM-project on general level. That proofs that it is important to use both internal and external stakeholders and involve then already in the beginning of the digital projects to make the digital sales effectiveness successful. This is also said in the Zoltners' et al. (2021) model.

5.1.3 Factors which can slow down the digital sales development within the B2B-companies

In general, all sales teams of different organization were expected to use new digital platforms in all levels: local or on international level. However, it was also mentioned a few times that it is important that the organizations encourage salespersons to use the tools already from the beginning. This, of course, cannot be completed if sales teams feel that the new tools are not giving value

for them which is related to poor adoption factor. It is proved that poorly developed project lead also to poor implementation. This means that digital sales effectiveness will fail. When new tools are only given to the sales teams and not developed on local level they are not took into use and projects cannot be completed.

Also, if the salespersons have a wrong mindset or they are lacking the skills the implementation can be slowed down. Giving the responsibility to a project leader who has not the correct ability to implement the project, leads to slow down the progress.

5.2 Recommendations and managerial implications

In this study, it has been researched how organizations should support digital sales effectiveness and which factors are promoting or slowing done the digitalization of sales and starting to use digital platform to make sales more effective and efficient. In the future, it would be valuable to research further the feelings of salespersons and how they are experiencing the digital sales effectiveness from the human side. The human side is linked to the feelings of use digital tools.

The study and the results are beneficial for companies who are in the process of changing the sales processes from traditional to more digital approach. For Lyreco Finland it is valuable for several reasons. It goes without saying that Covid-19 and pandemic time changed also whole Lyreco’s sales environment and processes.

First, the study presents the digital buying process, customer journey and digital sales force effectiveness and factors which are affecting to the successful adoption of digitalization and platforms. This gives them ideas how the digital tools and adaption should be prepared, planned, and implemented for the sales team. The organization can avoid the failure factors and focus on excellent communication, development, effective progress and training, and senior support activities, for example. It is very important that in the digital sales

projects the digital readiness, adoption and sustainability factors are considered carefully. The company benefits when roles related to digital projects are align according to employees skills and mindset.

Second, the study presents a concrete overview of similar companies what have those done when digital sales effectiveness has been successful and lead to business growth and using the new digital tools as daily basis by sales. In other words, the sales have adopted the digital leap smoother, what it takes that the teams are willing to use and integrate to use digital tools. Based on the study, the most important matters, from practical perspective, seems to be the communication, possibility to develop the tools together, external support and participating the internal stakeholders. That is very valuable information not only to the commissioner but also the companies which are struggling when implementing new digital tools for sales. For the future projects and implementations, it is highly recommended that sales leaders get familiar with the factors which are promoting and those which are slowing down digital sales effectiveness and take advantage of Zoltner et al. (2021) checklist for successful sales force digitalization (Zoltner et al., 2021).

Third, the study's results give opportunity for both the commissioner and other companies to make deeper dive into the whole company culture. It is relevant to notice that there are many companies which are still making the enormous changes in their sales processes when taking the lead of digitalization internally. Companies should not only implement digital platforms one by one, but they should also start to consider the buying personas, digital customer journey, B2B-decision processes, sales and marketing strategies, action plans, KPI's and measurements. In a big picture, everything is affecting to everything and this way there is a possibility to change the whole organization mindset to more effective digital sales growth.

5.3 Future Research Ideas

This study focuses on the organization’s point of view of how implement digital projects for sales successfully. In the future, it would be very valid to research how does the human side effect to digital sales development. Alavi & Habel (2021) highlight the human side in their research which should be studied further in sales organizations.

Today soft factors such as emotional intelligence is increasing natural feature leaders should have in business world. Daniel Goleman's framework of emotional intelligence (1995) complements the concept of empathy in the business landscape. Further studies should research how emotional intelligence could be linked to digitalization of companies and how it can promote digital sales effectiveness in the perspective of implementing new tools and daily use of them. (Goleman, 1995; Holt et al., 2017.)

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The survey form

Research Information

You are participating in a scientific research study. In this privacy notice, you will be informed about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You have the right, according to the law, to receive this information.

I am a student at Turku University of Applied Sciences, and I am conducting my thesis on sales management. The title of my research is "Factors Affecting Digital Sales Effectiveness in B2B Businesses," and it explores the facilitators and inhibitors of digital sales effectiveness.

You are invited to participate in this research. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Participating in the research is considered consent for the use of the information requested in the study. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

In addition to yourself, approximately 10 sales management professionals are participating in the research. This is a one-time study, and you will not be contacted again in the future.

The research will be conducted remotely using the Teams platform. The research method involves a conversational thematic interview, covering pre-planned themes.

The order of the themes is flexible, and not all topics may be discussed to the same extent with each interviewee. The duration of a single interview is approximately 40 minutes.

Below is the privacy notice and interview questions for your reference.

Thank you for your participation.

Best regards,

Suvi Aalto

Privacy notice

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes described in the notice. The following personal data about you will be collected in the study: name, email address, title, experience in the field, as well as video and text recordings created by Microsoft Teams. The collection of data is based on the research plan.

The controller is responsible for the lawfulness of the processing of personal data in the study.

The controller of this study is:

Suvi Aalto
Research Executor
suvi.aalto@edu.turkuamk.fi

Thesis Supervisor:
Sirpa Hänti
Principal Lecturer
sirpa.hanti@turkuamk.fi

The data processor refers to the entity that processes personal data on behalf of the controller and in accordance with its instructions. They operate under the supervision of the research personnel, and data processing agreements are made with them. Your personal data will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties. The research registry will be disposed of by the end of July 2024 after the conclusion of the study.

Interview questions:

Who are you?

In which industries have you worked?

What is your background in sales?

Can you describe the sales teams you have led?

Have you been involved in or led projects related to digital sales tools?

What kind of projects?

Customer registry / tool related to customer journey (e.g., CRM or other customer database or email platform implementation).

New customer acquisition, such as prospecting or lead generation.

Tools related to data collection and usage, such as customer data enrichment (use of Profinder, Asiakastieto, Vainu, etc.).

Adoption of social selling and social media platforms (such as LinkedIn, Twitter, TikTok).

Implementation of artificial intelligence (such as Chat GPT).

Other.

At what stage is the project in your company or team?

Can you describe how the adoption of the digital sales tool(s) progressed?

Do you find the adoption of new digital sales tools easy?

Were there challenges involved in the adoption of the digital sales tool?

Were there challenges involved in using the digital sales tool?

What could have been done differently?

Could anything has been done better?

How has the company's management supported the adoption of the digital sales tool(s)?

How has the company's management supported the use of the digital sales tool(s)?

How has the company's management supported digital sales leadership?

Follow-up questions:

In Zoltners et al (2021) framework for effective digital sales, there are facilitating and hindering factors. Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1-4, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, and 4 = strongly agree.

Digital readiness

The adoption of the new tool received the necessary support from management relative to the project's expectations.

Training related to the adoption of the new tool was A) agile and B) comprehensive.

The adoption of the new tool involved a cross-functional team and project leaders who operated across team boundaries.

Tool acceptance

The use of the new tool involved A) a test group or similar and B) feedback from end-users, which was considered in the project's objectives.

Tool longevity

A communication strategy was implemented regarding the use of the new tool.

Incentives were provided to support achieving goals related to the use of the new tool.

Measurement and reinforcement of value were implemented regarding the use of the new tool to achieve goals.

Slow project progression

Measurement and reinforcement of value were implemented regarding the use of the new tool to achieve goals.

The scope of the project changed during implementation and affected its progression.

Overly ambitious/unrealistic goals affected the project's progression relative to its expectations and objectives.

Weak tool adoption

User trust in the new platform affected the adoption and assimilation of the project.

The value users derived from the new tool affected its adoption.

The effort users invested was greater than the value the tool provided relative to expectations.

Low impact of the outcome

Sufficient time was spent developing the new tool from diverse perspectives to achieve the expected outcome.

Users of the new tool have/had sufficient skills and the right mindset.

The new tool is long-lasting and can be utilized over the long term relative to its objectives.

Appendix 2: The results of the interviews

Factors related to failure:	**Question:**	**Answer:**	**R1**	**R2**	**R3**	**R4**	**R5**	**R6**	**R7**	**R8**	**R9**	**R10**
Slow Progress	Slow progress affected the project's advancement relative to expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	3	4	4	1	3	3	2	1	3	2
Slow Progress	The scope of the project changed during implementation and affected progress.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	1	3	1	1	1	4	1	2	1	2
Slow Progress	Overly ambitious/unrealistic goals affected the project's progress relative to expectations and goals.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	3	1	2	3	1	3	2	3	3	1
Poor adaption	User trust in the new platform affected the project's adoption relative to expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	3	4	4	3	3	3	1	4	3	2
Poor adaption	The value users received from the new tool influenced the project's adoption relative to expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	3	1	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	4
Poor adaption	The effort users put in was much	1=totally disagree,	2	4	4	3	1	1	1	4	2	1

	greater than the value the tool produced relative to expectations.	2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.										
Low impact	Sufficient time was spent on developing the new tool from various perspectives compared to expectations for the end result.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	4	1	3	4	4	1	4	1	2	4
Low impact	Users of the new tool had/enough skill and the right mindset relative to expectations for the end result and goals.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	2	3	2	3	3	2	4	2	2	3
Factors related to success:	**Question:**	**Answer:**	**R1**	**R2**	**R3**	**R4**	**R5**	**R6**	**R7**	**R8**	**R9**	**R10**
Digital readiness	The introduction and use of the new tool received the necessary support from the management compared to expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	4	2	2	3	4	3	3	3	3	4
Digital readiness	The training related to the introduction of the new tool was agile compared to expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	3	1	2	2	3	2	3	3	1	3
Digital readiness	The training related to the introduction of the new tool was comprehensive	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewha	3	1	2	4	4	2	4	2	2	4

	compared to expectations.	t agree, 4=totally agree.										
Digital readiness	A multidisciplinary working group and project leaders were in the process of implementing the new tool, acting beyond team boundaries relative to the project's expectations.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewha t disagree, 3=somewha t agree, 4=totally agree.	4	2	2	3	4	2	4	3	3	3
Adoption	Feedback from a test group or similar was applied to the use of the new tool in relation to the project's goals.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewha t disagree, 3=somewha t agree, 4=totally agree.	4	1	1	3	4	1	4	3	4	4
Adoption	Feedback from end users was applied to the use of the new tool in relation to the project's goals.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewha t disagree, 3=somewha t agree, 4=totally agree.	4	3	1	4	4	3	4	2	2	4
Sustainability	A communication strategy was developed concerning the use of the new tool.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewha t disagree, 3=somewha t agree, 4=totally agree.	4	1	3	1	2	1	4	2	1	3
Sustainability	Incentives were provided to support the achievement of goals related to the use of the new tool.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewha t disagree, 3=somewha t agree, 4=totally agree.	3	1	1	1	3	1	3	1	1	2

Sustainability	Measurement and reinforcement of value are being implemented concerning the project's goals in relation to the use of the new tool.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	2	3	3	1	1	1	4	3	1	3
Sustainability	The new tool is long-lasting and can be utilized in the long term relative to expectations and goals.	1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree.	4	4	2	4	4	3	3	4	4	4