Master ICT in Business and the Public Sector

The change in B2B sales capabilities since COVID-19

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Master's Thesis

Abstract

Business to Business (B2B) sales has been highly impacted by COVID-19. On the 27th of February, the first Dutch COVID-19 case was discovered. Because of the high contagious nature of COVID-19, the Dutch government quickly introduced measures to prevent the spread of the virus. B2C sales could deal with these new measures fairly easily because it has been the key focus of many digital transformation projects. B2B sales have remained more conservative and relied primarily on relationship building through physical meetings. It was precisely those physical meetings that were no longer possible because of COVID-19. In most companies, sales organisations play an increasingly strategic role in creating competitive advantage for the firm. These competitive advantages are created through sales capabilities. To investigate how B2B sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19, 24 interviews with B2B salespeople were conducted. Through these semi structured interviews, the guiding questions were answered. From these answers, it can be concluded that there have been changes in the B2B sales capabilities since COVID-19.

The changes in the B2B sales cycle allow salespeople to do their jobs more efficiently, but despite that, salespeople are negative about the changes on a personal level. Since COVID-19 it has become more important than ever to manage this resistance to change and ensure that salespeople enjoy their "new" work. COVID-19 accelerated the impact of digital technologies on the B2B salesforce. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact that digital technologies have on the B2B salesforce and exploit the opportunities that are created by digital technology. As a result, salespeople and managers can be trained to make optimal use of the digital technologies. Because of the increase in remote B2B sales employees, extra attention must be paid to internal communication to ensure that there is no information asymmetry. Customers have come to consider physical contact and relationship building less essential since COVID-19. A salesforce should therefore focus more on salesmanship and less on account management. By responding to this change in capabilities, a company can create competitive advantages, not only during COVID-19 but also in the "new normal".

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

Much has changed in the world since the outbreak of COVID-19 and Business to Business (B2B) sales have not been spared. The Chinese authorities reported the first human cases with COVID-19 symptoms in early December 2019. This highly contagious virus was doomed to take the entire world by surprise. Within a few months, this virus had spread around the world, sparing no one[50].

COVID-19 has disrupted industries and has altered a lot of business processes. The dutch government closed all physical stores and imposed a physical contact ban [72]. These measures have forced sales to change massively. Sales can be divided based on intended customers, resulting in: Business to Consumer (B2C) and B2B. B2C sales have been the key focus in many digital transformation projects [62]. E-commerce has been adapted as a key channel to sell products and services [34]. These transformations made it fairly easy for most B2C companies to adapt their sales cycle to the changing circumstances caused by COVID-19.

The B2B sales market has stayed more traditional, concentrating on building relationships and without many digital transformation projects[70]. B2B salespeople mainly built these relationships through psychical meetings[93]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dutch government gave strict advice to work from home, which resulted in a shift from physical meetings towards digital meetings. [93]. Most B2B companies have been cautious in applying digital techniques and implementing other changes in their sales cycle, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced organisations to change their sales cycle.

"The butterfly effect is the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a deterministic nonlinear system can cause a large difference in a later state"[109], a far-flung butterfly flapping its wings could lead to a tornado on the other side of the world and a person eating his lunch in Wuhan could lead to a world in lockdown and millions of casualties [21].

1.1 Problem statement

Sales departments are playing an increasingly major strategic role in creating a competitive advantage for their company, yet there is little research into sales capabilities[46]. Guenzi et al. showed that there is a positive relationship between sales capabilities and the performance of a company [46]. For a company, it can therefore be precious to know whether the B2B sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19. Even though sales capabilities are important for almost every company, no study to date has been done on how these B2B sales have changed since COVID-19. To close the research gap between academic literature and practice, it is necessary to know how the B2B sales have changed since COVID-19. This is done by using organisational capabilities as a lens. By analysing the change in operational routines that exist within the B2B sales capabilities, it will be possible to examine if and how the B2B sales capabilities have changed. Besides examining the organisational routines, it is also crucial to look at how these changes occurred and what the perceived effects of these changes are. With the answers to these questions, it will be possible to answer if and how sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19. Thus, the following research question was proposed.

How has the the COVID-19 pandemic affected the B2B sales capability?
In order to answer the research question, the following guiding questions were proposed:

1. *What are the routines of B2B sales prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic*

2. *How are routines of B2B sales being transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic*

3. *What are the perceived effects of the B2B sales transformation due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

1.2 Thesis outline

This thesis will look at the changes in the B2B sales capabilities since COVID-19. The change in the B2B sales capabilities will be examined through the lens of organisational routines. Therefore, literature research will be conducted on these topics. First, a deeper understanding of B2B sales is necessary. This study will look at the differences in characteristics of B2B and B2C sales, existing B2B sales cycle models, and trends in B2B sales. Secondly, interviews will be conducted with B2B salespersons. Qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews. After collecting and analysing the data, the results will be discussed and the guiding questions will be answered. With these answers

it will be possible to gain a deeper understanding of how the B2B sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19. Applying this knowledge, this thesis will also provide a recommendation for practice, science and future work.

This research project will be an in-house project at the Leiden Institute of Advanced Computer Science. The first supervisor is Dr. C.J. Stettina MSc and the second supervisor is Tyron Offerman MSc.

Chapter 2

Literature review

The goal of this literature review is to gain an insight and understanding of the existing research and debates on B2B sales, organisational capabilities, and organisational routines. This review will start with a brief introduction to sales, to then look at how B2B sales are described in the literature, if there are any B2B sales models, and which B2B sales trends are present in the literature. The changes in the B2B sales cycle will be analysed through the lens of organisational capabilities. Organisational capabilities will be discussed in the second section. To get a better understanding of the B2B sales capabilities, the organisational routines that exist in the B2B sales cycle will be analysed. Therefore, in the third section, organisational routines will be discussed in more detail.

A sale is a transaction between two or more parties in which the buyer receives tangible or intangible goods, services, or assets in exchange for money. Sales can roughly be divided into B2C and B2B[121]. B2B companies are marketing and selling their services or good solely to businesses. B2C are companies that market and sell their services or goods to consumers [77].

2.1 Business to Business Sales

The choice for a company to target customers or businesses comes with major implications. The transaction in B2B sales often entails the sale of a complex product, multiple individuals that are included in the sales and purchasing process this increases the complexity of the dynamics between buyer and seller [93]. Because a larger number of individuals is involved in the sales and purchase process, the sales process often takes longer and contains more relationship building to form trust between the two companies and the involving stakeholders [39]. In order to reach optimal results, companies have to implement a sales cycle that is geared towards either consumers or businesses [93].

2.1.1 Sales cycle

In an attempt to improve the effectiveness of the sale, many different types of selling models have been devised [56]. Dubinsky came up with 6 steps with which he tried to model the B2B sales cycle [29]. The follow-up step was added in 1981. Prior to this, it was thought that the sale cycle ceased the moment a deal was made. However, this has been reconsidered and resulted in a seventh step. This 7-step model has been widely accepted, used extensively in literature on B2B sales and applicable to almost all B2B sales cycles[126][59][92][81][89][63][108][43][74][49][57][17][110][115]. Therefore, it will be used to get an overview of a B2B sales cycle. The sales process has also been described in the context of the evolution of a customer-seller relationship [105]. This process is divided in five phases: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution [30]. The seven step model is used in this research because it gives an insight into the actions a seller has to perform in order to conduct a sale[74]. To get an idea of what an average B2B sales cycle looks like, the seven steps will be briefly explained [29].

1)Prospecting is the first step in the B2B sales cycle which consists of identifying prospects (potential customers).

(2)Pre-approach includes all the activities done between the prospecting step and the actual visit with a prospect. This may include, but is not limited to: research prospect, research product, research prospects needs, reviewing previous correspondence, talking to gate keeper and mental preparation.

(3)Approach is the first contact a salesperson has with a potential customer. The approach usually takes about a minute. The most important thing about the approach is to make a good impression. It comprises of tactics and strategies employed by the salesperson to gain an audience and establish initial rapport with the prospect.

(4)Presentation is the main body of the sales meeting. The primary goal of this step is to give potential buyers sufficient information to understand the benefits of the product. This can be facilitated by a presentation that is built around a product demonstration. This step is often referred to as the most important step of the sales cycle.

(5)Overcoming objections is the step in which a salesperson tries to remove a prospect's doubt. An objection can by described as prospect's wavering about the product or company and customer questions. Objections used to have a negative image, but recently it has gained a positive one. By identifying objections, the true buyers can be identified.

(6)Close is the step that occurs after any objections have successfully been overcome by the salesperson. The salesperson must ask for a commitment to buy

the good or service.

(7)Follow-up is the last step in the sales cycle, it was included in the sales cycle in 1981. A salesperson assumes that the sales cycle does not end after closing a deal. The goal of this step is to make sure the customer is happy with the product/service that was promised, ultimately leading to potentially up-selling(selling a more expensive comparable higher-end product or service) and cross-selling (selling related or complementary products or services).

The addition of the follow-up step symbolises a much larger change in B2B sales: the changing buyer-seller relationships. The relationship between a customer and a business in a B2B context has moved from a transaction-based relationship to a relational-relationship [73] [18]. A sales cycle does not end when a transaction has been done but efforts are then made to maintain the relationship. Research shows that this change was brought by behavioural changes in customers. Customer expectation, avoidance of buyer-seller negotiation, globalisation and increasing competition resulted in a move towards relational selling [74]. This resulted in a different way of measuring success. Relational selling requires a qualitative outcome measure and transaction based selling requires a quantitative outcome measure[52]. The qualitative performance measures can be divided in three categories: performance with customer[54], sales relationship effectiveness[53] and relationship-building performance [52].

2.1.2   IT in the sales cycle

As far back as the early 90s, it was observed that IT could have a positive impact on the B2B sales process [76]. Anderson stated in 1996 that a company should aim for a mobile sales force through the use of electronic data exchange, video conferencing and virtual private networks[7].The use of technology is said to influence the performance of B2B sales in three different ways: access of information, information analysis and communication [52]. The sales technologies that are typically adopted by B2B sales forces aim to improve the relationship between the buyer and the seller [54]. The technologies that appear most often in the literature are: video meetings, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools, social media and Artificial Intelligence.

The implementation and impact of technology in the sales cycle is a growing challenge in the B2B sales [96]. This is demonstrated with the implementation of virtual meetings [15]. Communication plays a major role in the success of a salesperson in relation selling [88]. Virtual meetings can enable flexibility, reduce costs, increase productivity and increase the frequency of meetings [4]. Despite these benefits, a report by McKinsey found that only 39% of B2B companies conduct virtual meetings with customers pre-COVID-19 [10]. The communication problems that arise when using communication technologies in B2B sales are: information delay and loss, technical failure in communication, decreased job satisfaction, poor relationship building, shorter windows of communication time,

delayed feedback and poor message clarity [41].

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems have become enormously popular in B2B sales in recent years. They are widely used in practice and have also been the subject of much research. [78][6][45]. A CRM is "a cross-functional process for achieving a continuing dialogue with customers, across all of their contact and access points, with personalised treatment of the most valuable customers, to increase customer retention and the effectiveness of marketing initiatives" [26]. As suggested by this definition, CRM is a strategy that results in the most suitable relationship with a customer, a process that is supported by a CRM tool[116]. Research has shown that CRM technology can help salespeople to enhance sales [32], improve the ability to connect clearly with clients [3] and positively impact sales performance [61].

In recent years, social media has increasingly been added to the CRM resulting in social CRM [96]. Life without social media is unimaginable for many and a lot of companies are trying to take advantage of this [2]. Social media has progressed from a tool to connect with friends to a platform where you can connect and create deeper relationships with potential customers[17]. The most important functions that social media has in the sales cycle are building a network of contacts and sharing content [96]. Social media can be of value to the sales cycle if the salesperson is able to identify the more valuable prospects and to proactively serve the customer through social media [17].

The latest trend in the implementation of technology in the B2B sales cycle is Artificial Intelligence (AI). This emerging technology can enable computers to solve problems without human intervention [115]. The previous technologies introduced in the B2B sales cycle helped the sales employee with collecting, processing or communicating data but the decision making was still done by humans [81]. AI could take over tasks from humans and make a decision without human interference. Syam et al. refers to this as the fourth industrial revolution in the sales cycle in which computers will take over much of the decision making from humans in the B2B sales cycle[115]. However, there is disagreement on the extent to which AI can take over the sales cycle. Paschen et al. suggests that the AI will not replace salespeople and will only have a supportive role in the near future[82]. The use of AI in the sales cycle is still in its infancy and there is still a lot of scepticism and lack of trust towards AI.

The latest research on B2B sales is mainly focused on the changes since COVID-19. Two main differences can be seen in the literature: the accelerated digital transformation and the new preferred communication method of clients. A survey of 3600 sales employees across 11 countries showed that COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation in the B2B sales cycle[10]. Most B2B companies had a very cautious approach to applying digital technology in the sales cycle, but with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies were being forced to quickly incorporate and accept digital technologies [92].

This shift to digital can also be seen in the preferred interaction method of customers since COVID-19. Guenzi et al. showed that customers are preferring non face-to-face communication and self-service (no human interaction)[45]. Ray et al. found that customers prefer digital interaction over physical interaction when self-service can not meet their needs. Rangarajan et al. examined these changes in interaction and mapped the changing mediums used in the sales cycle. They also examined how a company can best prepare for an exogenous shock such as COVID-19. They recommend that companies create an adaptive sales force to increase resilience. [92][108].

Kubiak et al. described three process steps they found in the follow-up step of the sales cycle. Retaining customers and uncovering opportunities for up-selling or cros-selling[64].

2.1.3   Business to Business sales capabilities

In contrast to marketing capabilities, little has been written about sales capabilities in the literature [46]. Less than 4% of the marketing articles is sales related [130]. This is remarkable because research shows a considerable effect of the sales force on topline performance and empirical evidence that suggests investment on marketing has lower return on investments than sales [5].

An important change in the research on B2B sales capabilities is the shift in focus from individual-level to firm-level capabilities[122]. Prior to this change, scholars were able to identify what the characteristics were of individual salespeople performing well. However, they were not able to identify the organisational capabilities that affect the firm's performance. Churchill et al. suggest that characteristics of individual salespeople are poor predictors of a company's performance [20]. By only looking at the individual-level characteristics of sales, only a partial view on sales capabilities can be drawn. Nowadays, sales is seen as a cross-functional process that is designed and implemented by employees with different responsibilities and roles throughout the organisation [74][114]. Verbeke et al. stresses the importance of identifying organisational-level determinants of sales performance instead of individual-level determinants [122].

From the existing literature, two types of capabilities can be identified that have a positive influence on the performance of a company: personal selling capabilities and sales force management capabilities[46][23][25].

Personal selling capabilities are referred to as the customer facing processes that are primarily performed by salespeople. These personal selling capabilities are likely to directly influence the performance of a company [23]. In the past, personal selling skills were seen as activities performed by a single salesperson. Nowadays, personal selling skills are seen as an organisation level capability [8]. This is because the amount of people actively involved in a B2B

sales cycle has grown. In the literature, 2 personal selling capabilities are mentioned: Salesmanship (revenue generating processes) and Account management (relationship-building/nurturing processes)[25][46][75].

Sales force management capabilities are the capabilities which are related to the organising context of a firm. The three sales force management capabilities are: Sales force structuring, talent management and customer targeting [23][94][129]. Sales force structuring includes the long-term strategic area of sales force structuring, including the organisation and the sizing of the sales force. Talent management includes the acquisition, development and retention of the human capital. Customer targeting includes the allocation of sales efforts across different markets and products.

The existing literature on B2B sales capabilities is limited. There has not been any research on the impact of the existing B2B sales capabilities on different organisational outcomes. Also, only a small number of selling capabilities have been investigated. Sabines et al. highlighted that salespeople are increasingly involved in activities not related to sales resulting in the increasing importance of internal coordination and internal navigation [99]. Sales controlling, sales planning and motivational processes are also mentioned as possible B2B sales capabilities that still need to be investigated[46][87].

2.1.4 Business to Business sales routines

In the existing literature, there have been several studies on the routines that exist in the B2B sales cycle. However, there is currently no study that has examined the routines of a whole sales cycle. Research has been done into the routines of parts of the sales cycle.

Lindberg examined the routines that are performed in the lead generation step through workshops with salespeople. The study focused on inbound lead generation and found the following B2B inbound lead generation routines: pay-per-click advertising, blogging and activity on social media [68]. Säde examined the routines that exist when a salesperson uses social media in their sales process. The routines she found are: Acquisition of customer insights, connecting to prospects, customers and influencers and engagement through valuable content for building valuable business relationships [100]. Gillen et al. examined the high-level processes involved in outbound lead generation. They found the following high-level processes performed in this step: attend events, direct mailing, cold calling and social media.

Rai conducted research on the lead qualification process. Through various interviews, they identified the following high-level process steps: generate & collect intelligence about leads, score leads, pas off leads to sales [91].

Kaski et al. have studied what routines are performed before and during the ini-

tial meeting[60]. Through interviews and video recording of these interviews they found the following routines. During the preparation step: capturing customer insight and clearing one's own mind. During the initial meeting: breaking the ice, finding common ground, establishing emotional connection and maintaining close relationship.

2.2   Capabilities

Organisational capabilities have been around in literature for a long time. The first studies about organisational capabilities were done in the 1950s [107][83]. These studies resulted in some useful insights,, but a lack of theoretical understanding of capabilities resulted in little to no implementation[27]. Organisational capabilities gained new interest when the resource-based view (RBV) was introduced [11]. RBV is a popular perspective that is used to explain the performance of an organisation. RBV assumes that competitive advantage is created by a pool of resources and capabilities possessed by a company. The pool of resources and capabilities is different among companies.

"An organisational capability is a high-level routine (or collection of routines) that, together with its implementing input flows, confers upon an organisation's management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type"[125]. Organisational capabilities can be seen as the ability of an organisation to perform the most basic functional activities [22]. Routines are seen as the building blocks of organisational capabilities. This ensures they share many characteristics. They both are repetitive, patterned, exist to achieve a predictable outcome, specific to the organisation in which they are performed and context dependent [28][124][47]. But there is certainly a difference between routines and capabilities. Capabilities include a more crucial and bigger part of the activities performed by an organisation. Capabilities are combined competencies and abilities of the individuals in a company. [28] [124].

There are two different kinds of organisational capabilities: Ordinary capabilities and dynamic capabilities. It is important to distinguish between the two because the different types operate differently, resulting in different implications for firm performance and competitive advantages [65][51]. Ordinary capabilities reflect the ability of a company to align routines, skills and processes to operate successfully in a specific market. It is often mistaken by companies that good ordinary capabilities guarantee a firm's growth and survival. In weak competitive environments, good ordinary capabilities can lead to a competitive advantage. In a competitive environment, the knowledge behind ordinary capabilities can be acquired through simple training or through consultants [16].

The focus of dynamic capabilities is on changing how an organisation makes revenue. Most of the time, this change has to be done because of a changing business environment. This can be done by changing the product, the scale of

the product, the production process, the customers, or a combination of those [125][47].

The capabilities of a firm involve complex, coordinated patterns of knowledge and skill that have become embedded as routines over time [42]. Following this perspective, capabilities are often measured and conceptualised as organisational processes that are performed better than the competitors [14][33]. This allows researchers to examine the organisational capabilities through the lens of organisational routines.

2.3 Organisational Routines

Organisational routines have a rich history. Stene introduced routines in 1940 and described organisational routines as "Interaction patterns that are pertinent for the coordination of organisational activities" [112]. For a while, little attention was paid to the concept of organisational routines. In 1982, the book *An evolutionary theory of economic change* drew new attention to the concept by putting organisational routines centre-stage. Organisational routines, as a central unit of analysis, would help understand firms, the economy, organisational and economic changes[79]. This book was the starting signal for more attention and research in organisational routines [12].

This growing popularity in organisational routines also has a downside: the literature is full of inconsistencies and ambiguities [79] [31] [48] [55]. In this research, the following definition will be used for organisational routines: "repetitive, recognisable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors" [36]. Organisational routines are nowadays considered as the primary means through which an organisation achieves its objectives [79]. Pentland and Feldman claim that a routine consist of three core elements: the ostensive part, the performative part and artifacts[84].

1. The ideal or schematic form of a routine is called **The Ostensive aspect**. A routine can be viewed differently by actors. The ostensive aspect tries to give an objective and concrete view of the routine but is not the full view as the implementation is not included.

2. **The performative aspect** is the implementation of the routine. "The specific actions taken by specific people at specific times when they are engaged in an organisational routine"[86][38].

3. **An Artifact** can be described as the physical manifestations of an organisational routine. The range of such artifacts that constrain and enable organisational routines is endless. An artifact can range from formal rules to machines and even to the layout of a building. It can be any kind of supportive non-human system or documentation that is in a way related to an organisational routine. It is often thought that standard operating

procedures and rules decide the patterns of action that are related to the performative aspect. Rules and procedures always have open contextual details which ensure that there is a difference in the performative aspect[84].

Organisational routines are considered basic components of organisational behaviour. Therefore, it is possible to use organisational routines to explain organisational change and organisational capabilities[79][128]. By using organisational routines as a lens, changes on micro-level can be captured. From these changes at micro level, it is also possible to look at the changes at macro level: organisational capabilities [118][117].

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Approach

The objective of this research is to understand how the B2B sales capabilities have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is done through the lens of organisational routines. In the interviews, participants were asked about their day to day activities in a sales process and their personal routines and how these changed since COVID-19. With this information, the sales process (pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19) of the participants can be mapped. Through this visualisation, the change in routines and mediums in the sales cycle can be examined. It was also asked what the effect of the change in organisational routines and mediums is. With this knowledge, a good idea of how the B2B sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19 can be formed. The following sections describe the research method used and why it is used. Then it is described how this research method was applied in this study.

3.1.1 Research method

The "research onion" is a process that helps in making different decisions a researcher has to go through when developing a research methodology. The research onion by Saunders et al. is shown in figure 3.1. In the process of the research onion, a choice has to be made for each layer in order to get a research methodology. The first choice that has to be made is the research philosophy. The objective of this research is to discover how the B2B sales capabilities have changed since COVID-19. Interpreting and understanding the answers given by experts is required to achieve the objective and thus interpretivism is chosen as the research philosophy for this research [101].

After pulling off the first layer of the research onion, the approach layer appears. Two different approaches are distinguished by Saunders et al.: inductive and deductive. An inductive approach is used when there is very little knowledge on the subject and a deductive approach would be used when there is a well-

established pre-existing body of research [104]. From the literature review, it proved difficult to find a well-established body of research and thus an inductive approach will be used in this research.

Having understood the approach layer, it is time for the next layer: strategy. A choice had to be made between using grounded theory or case study. The ultimate goal of a case study is to develop a detailed analysis of one or more cases [127]. However, the purpose of this study is more than just analysing one or more cases. It also involves analysis and interpretation. That is why grounded theory was chosen. The next layer is called choices. A decision between mono-method, mixed method and multi method is made. It was considered using both a qualitative and a quantitative approach. This would allow the answers from the qualitative part to be validated by a quantitative study on a broader audience. But this was not done due to time constraints. An attempt was also made to apply document analysis, but in practice, nobody had (or was willing to share) a document describing the sales process. Therefore, a mono method is applied. This research is about the changes in B2B sales capabilities since COVID-19 and thus a comparison is being made between pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 leading to a longitudinal time horizon.
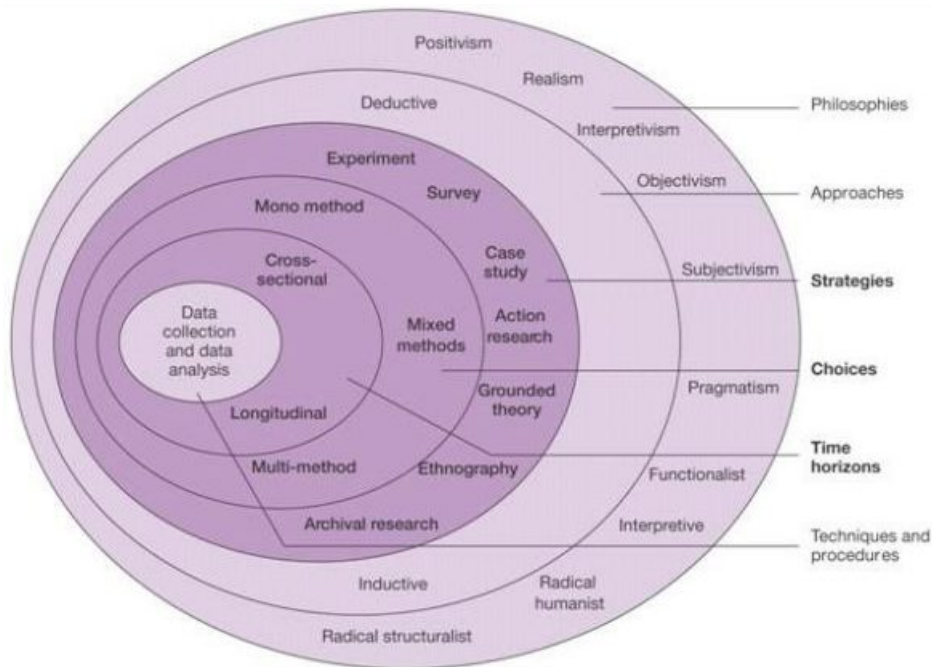

Figure 3.1: Research onion [104]

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3.1.2 Data collection

Qualitative research often depends on interviews as a data collecting method. An interview allows participants to give in-depth answers about their experience and opinions. Qualitative research does not just answer the what where and when questions, but also addresses the why and how questions[90].

The format of an interview can range from unstructured (no preconceived questions) to highly structured (Sticking to a preconceived set of questions)[102][119]. This study employed a semi-structured interview design. A semi-structured interview is an interview in which a formalised list of questions is being used but there is space for new questions to be brought up. This gives space for clarifications of answers and to express a possible free flow of thoughts. A semi structured interviews allow for a rich data collection and flexibility that is necessary for an explorative study[113].

An interview guide was developed before conducting the interviews. The important questions and subjects that are relevant to this study are covered in this interview guide. An interview guide also helps to avoid pitfalls and intrusive questions [19]. The interview guide will support the interviews which result in the gathering of relevant data. Because semi-structured interviews will be used in this study, the interview is not fixed in the interview guide. There is room for questions or topics not described in the interview guide[19]. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

In order to get relevant data from the interviews, it is important to find relevant participants to be interviewed. Some criteria have been established for the interviewee. The first criterion is that the interviewee must have experience in B2B sales in the time before COVID-19 and during COVID. Secondly, the participant must be in contact with the buying party. As a final criterion, the participant must sell a service or software product. An attempt will be made to interview more than 20 participants to get a good picture of the changes in the sales process of different industries.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews had to be conducted online. At first, this was a disappointment, but it soon turned out that it actually enhanced the research. The elimination of travel time meant that people could be interviewed throughout the Netherlands without spending hours travelling. The participants were able to plan the interview in their schedule more easily as well. The interviews were conducted via MS Teams, Google Meet and Skype. Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) was the programme used to record the interviews. Interviews were recorded so that the interviewer's full attention can be on the interview and not on transcribing. This is done afterwards. The transcribing is done in Microsoft Word.

Before each interview, the interviewee was told that all data collected will

be anonymised. It was also explained that the interviewees were participating in this study voluntarily and that they could indicate at any time (including after the interview) that their data will not be used for this study. The interview was only continued if the interviewee indicated they understood these prerequisites and consented.

Initially, the network of Heijnen and Offerman was used to find interviewees. This soon proved to be insufficient. Most of the participants were brought in by mailing organisations. The companies were found through Google and through LinkedIn. This resulted in a group consisting of Dutch-speaking and English-speaking interviewees, working in different organisations in different industries. The interviews were conducted from 30-06-2021 to 18-10-2021.

3.1.3   Data analysis

During the first interview, it turned out that it was not possible to record the interview using the video call tool; OBS had already been investigated as a second option and this was used for the remaining interviews regardless of the video call tool. There have been no problems with the recordings. The interviews were recorded so that the focus during the interview could be fully on the interview and the interview could be transcribed afterwards. The most difficult part of the interviews was to keep the interview from straying too far. This was solved by going back to the questions more quickly.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the next stage was the coding of the interviews. Line by line the interviews are being broken down, analysed, compared and categorised. This resulted in a code or multiple codes that are being assessed line by line, this is called open coding. In the next step, axial coding, all the text fragments per subject were compared, searching for differences and similarities. This allowed for a good understanding of the answers to the interview questions by the different interviewees. Lastly, selective coding was applied. This focus of this phase is not on coding but is on understanding the relation between the identified concepts [111]. Thus, results can be drawn from interviews that will be described in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter provides the results arising from the qualitative research, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The first section of the results shows the general characteristics of the participants. The second section focuses on the changes in the sales cycle since COVID-19. Subsequently, the impact of COVID-19 on the roles in the sales cycle, technology in the sales pipeline and the personal routines described. The next section of the results displays the perceived effects of the changes of the sales cycle, and finally, the answers to the question of which changes will remain permanent are shown.

4.1   General characteristics

This section outlines the general characteristics of the participants in this qualitative research. For this study, 24 participants were interviewed. These participants all work in B2B sales. The interviews were all conducted online from 30-06-2021 to 18-10-2021. Throughout this period, the general consensus on COVID-19 measures was the same. The mandate to work from home as much as possible was in place during this entire period. The interviews resulted in 18 hours and 49 minutes of audio. Table 4.1 shows the industry in which the interviewee works, what their job title is and how many years of experience they have in sales. The interviews are in order of when the interview was conducted. It can be seen from the table that there are relatively many participants in the information technology industry. It can also be noted that all the participants have at least 2 years of sales experience, which implies that they all have experience in B2B sales before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

Interviewee	Industry	Sales focus	Job title	Sales experience (Years)	Company Size (Employees)
A	Healthcare	Software solution & development	Business development manager	23	250+
B	Marketing	Software solution	Client developer manager	3	250+
C	Information industry	Software solution	Head of the ecosystem	2,5	51-250
D	Marketing	Service	Head of sales	11	0-10
E	Marketing	Service	Sales advisor	4	11-50
F	Information technology	Software solution & development	Sales manager	2,5	11-50
G	Aerospace	Software solution & development	Sales manager	4,5	51-250
H	Information technology	Software solution & development	Team lead sales	4	51-250
I	Marketing	Software solution & development	Account executive	9	51-250
J	Information technology	Software solution & development	Sales account	4	11-50
K	Information technology	Software solution & development	Sales director	12	11-50
L	Clothing	Software solution & development	Sales director	7,5	0-10
M	Logistics	Software solution & development	Commercial director	8	51-250
N	Marketing	Software solution	Senior sales representative	4	11-50
O	Logistics	Software solution & development	Account manager	5	51-250
P	Marketing	Software solution	Key Account executive	3,5	250+
Q	Marketing	Software solution & development	Sales consultant	4	11-50
R	Information technology	Software solution	Partner success manager	4	250+
S	Information technology	Service & software	Account executive	5	51-250
T	Healthcare	Software solution	Account manager	20	11-50
U	Communication technology	Software solution & development	Client director	15	250+
V	Marketing	Software solution	Sales account executive	12	51-250
W	Marketing	Service & software	Sales manager	11	250+
X	Information technology	Software solution	Sales manager	16	11-50

Table 4.1: Descriptives of participants

4.2 B2B sales cycle

After describing the general characteristics of the participants, we will now examine the changes in the sales cycle of the participants since COVID-19. In the interviews, participants were asked to describe the sales steps in their sales cycle during COVID-19. Then, for each step, we zoomed in on what activities took place within each sales step and what mediums were used in each sales step during COVID-19. These descriptions of the sales cycle before and during COVID-19 have been converted into visualisations. The sales cycle before COVID-19 and during COVID-19 is visualised per participant. The visualisations can be found in appendix D. After combining the various sales cycle visualisations, 2 visualisations resulted: pre-COVID-19 4.1 and during COVID-194.2. An oval represents the start and end point of the cycle. Rectangles are tasks and activities, diamonds represent decision that are made in the process and arrows indicate the process flow. Blue rectangles and tasks are performed by the participant, turquoise rectangles are tasks performed by other actors (e.g. other department or outsourced).

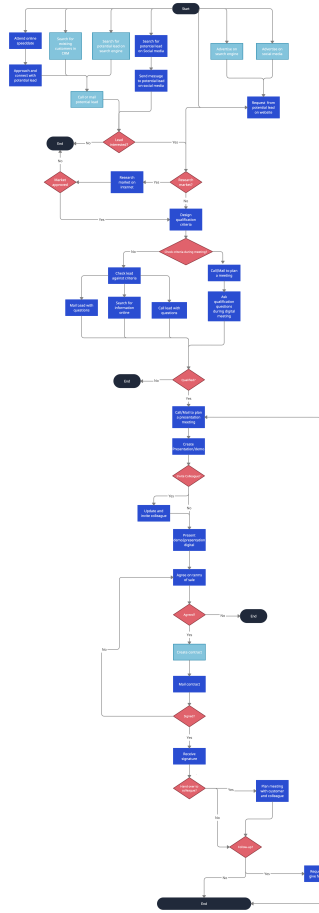Figure 4.1: Visualisation of combined sales cycles pre-COVID-19

Figure 4.2: Visualisation of combined sales cycles pre-COVID-19

By asking about the sales steps in the sales cycle of the participants, it is possible to see in broad lines what the sales processes of the various participants look like. 15 different sales step were mentioned by the interviewees: lead generation, lead qualification, approach, initial contact, preparation, presentation, product display, demonstration, demo, negotiation, signing, quotation, signature, closing and follow-up. Within these 15 steps there are several synonyms that can be combined. Approach is about the first contact with a customer and thus initial contact and approach are combined. Approach is more often mentioned than first contact, therefore, this term will be used. Demo, demonstration and product display will all be placed under the header of presentation. Presentation is mentioned most often in the interviews, therefore this term will be used. Quotation and closing will be added to the term signing (mentioned most often). After combining the synonyms, eight sales steps emerge from the interviews:

1. **Lead generation**; Generating interest for a product or service.

2. **Lead qualification**; Determine which lead is most likely to make a purchase.

3. **Preparation**; Preparation for initial contact with prospect.

4. **Approach**; First contact with prospect.

5. **Presentation**; Demonstrate how the product or service meets the needs of the prospect.

6. **Negotiation**; Listen to the prospect's concerns and address them.

7. **Signing**; Turning prospect in a customer.

8. **Follow-up**; Nurturing customer relationship.

These eight steps emerged from the interviews, but not every participant performs all these sales steps in their sales cycle. There are also differences in the order in which the sales steps are carried out. Table 4.2 shows the amount of participants performing a certain sales step in their sales cycle pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. Three differences can be seen in the adoption of the sales steps since COVID-19: Approach (23→24), Preparation (6→8) and Follow-up(9→5)

	Pre-COVID	**During COVID**
Lead generation	24	24
Lead qualification	24	24
Approach	23	24
Preparation	6	8
Presentation	24	24
Negotiation	24	24
Signing	24	24
Follow-up	9	5

Table 4.2: Frequency of sales step occurrence

The order in which these sales steps are performed differs per participant, which is shown in table 4.3. It shows the frequency of occurrence of a certain sales step sequence pre-COVID-19. On the left hand side of the figure there is a certain frequency that corresponds to the sequence of steps on the right hand side of the frequency. An arrow marks the progression from one sales step to the next. In the follow-up step, a ratio is shown in brackets. This ratio indicates how much of the previously noted frequency performs this step.
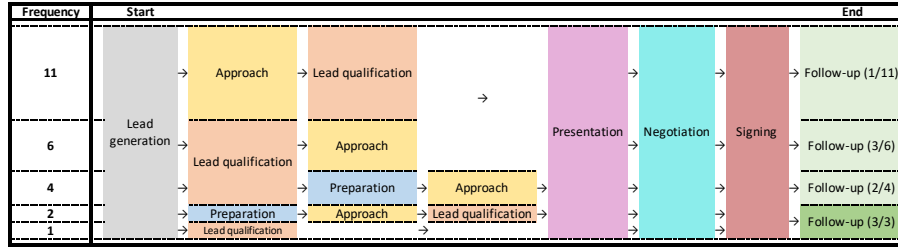
Figure 4.3: Frequency of sequence sales steps pre-COVID-19

Figure 4.4 shows the frequency of occurrence of a certain sales step sequence during-COVID-19.
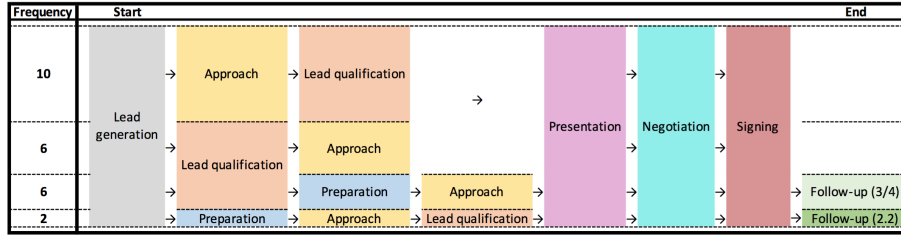

Figure 4.4: Frequency of sequence sales steps during-COVID-19

The changes at the highest level (sales steps) have been described. In the interviews, participants were asked what kind of activities and personal routines took place in a sales step. From these descriptions, a visualisation of their sales cycle pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 was made for each participant. From these visualisations, we can determine which routines and mediums occur in each sales step. For each sales step, the routines and mediums involved are described below. For each sales step, there is first a textual description of how the organisational routines have changed. Then, a table is shown with the changes on medium level. Explanation of the table is given below the table.

4.2.1 Lead generation

The first step in the sales cycle of all those interviewed is lead generation. From the codes of the interviews, 3 routines in this sales step emerge: search for potential lead, connect to potential lead and create content. The frequency of the routine search for potential lead and connect to potential lead has increased from 19 to 21 since COVID-19. The create content routine has been abandoned by 2 participants since COVID-19, resulting in a drop of frequency from 22 to 20 since COVID. Table 4.3 shows the differences on medium level since COVID-19. The organisational routines are bold and the corresponding mediums are listed below them.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
1. Search for potential lead		
1.1 Search engine	15	17
1.2 Physical social event	15	0
1.3 Social media	3	6
1.4 Lead source generator	1	2
1.5 Online trade fair	0	1

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
2. Connect to potential lead		
2.1 Physical social events	15	0
2.2 Email	13	12
2.3 Call	11	12
2.4 Social media	3	6
2.5 Physical meeting	2	0
2.6 Online social event	0	1
2.7 Video meeting	0	2

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
3. Create content		
3.1 Website	22	20
3.2 Ads	3	4
3.3 Social media	1	3
3.4 Webinar	0	6
3.5 Email	0	1

Table 4.3: Lead generation: Frequency of mediums

Search for potential lead (1)

The interviews show that the frequency of the routine: search for a potential lead has increased by 2. Interviewees G and K state they did not do the routines "searching for potential clients" pre-COVID-19. During COVID-19 they started performing this routine. Both G and K indicated that pre-COVID-19 they had enough leads coming to them, so there was no need to perform this routine. As stated by participant K *"At the beginning, the sales and marketing part fell through a bit because we were too busy with other things."*. The flow of incoming leads vanished during COVID-19 so they started doing this routine.

After coding the interviews, it is noticeable that the physical social events have been completely dropped. All participants who searched for potential leads via social events pre-COVID-19 indicated that this had completely disappeared. There were online alternatives for these physical social events. Most of the participants tried this but did not follow through. Participant B stated: *"Yeah there*

were a few. In the beginning I tried them but it just wasn't the same. The whole social part was non-existent and nobody was fully committed. Just doing other stuff". One participant was enthusiastic about the online alternative: *"Especially with network pools where you speak to someone else every 4 minutes, a kind of speed dating but digital. Really fantastic. That is really fun because in 4 minutes you can see whether someone is interesting or not."* as stated by participant E. The interviews also show that the frequency of the use of social media to search for potential leads has doubled from 3 to 6. As Participant T states : *"Very active LinkedIn campaigns. Much more active than before COVID-19s. My network has grown enormously since we started that campaign".*

Connect to potential lead(2)

As with the previous routine, the routine: connect to potential lead shows an increase in frequency from 19 to 21. Participants G and K, who also indicated that they had started to search for potential leads since COVID-19 have also started to connect to potential leads since COVID-19.
Pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. It appears once again that the physical social events have completely disappeared. Therefore, this can no longer be used to send a message to a potential client. There are online alternatives for these social events, but only one participant is actually using them.
Since COVID-19, more use is made of social media to connect with a potential lead. The frequency with which social media is used as a medium rose from 3 to 6.

Create content(3)

Interviewees E and T indicated that their content creation has completely disappeared since COVID-19. The reason given by both is that leads are no longer coming in through content creation. Participant T stated: *"pre-COVID, yes, but that has actually fallen away completely. We don't spend any time on that now".* Apart from the 2 participants who indicated that they no longer create content, 9 other participants also indicated that they receive fewer leads as a result of content.
The 2 participants that indicated that they are no longer creating content on their website were participant E and T who have completely dropped this routine. Therefore, the frequency of the medium website dropped from 22 to 20.
A webinar is an online event hosted by an organisation or company and broadcast to a group of individuals through their computers via the internet. The difference between a social event and a webinar is the amount of interaction among participants. During a webinar, a participant can ask questions to the party hosting but not approach and talk to other participants. The use of webinars has been introduced by 6 participants as mentioned by participant G: *"We have also started doing webinars. That also generates a large amount of leads".*

4.2.2 Lead qualification

The next step in the sales cycle that is looked at is the lead qualification. In this step, a lead is turned into a prospect. A lead is an unqualified contact, once this unqualified contact is qualified and approved it becomes a prospect. The coding of the interviews shows that this step consists of 2 routines: "Design criteria" and "Check lead against criteria". These steps cannot take place simultaneously. In order to test a lead against certain criteria, these criteria must first be devised. Both routines are performed by all participants before COVID-19 and this has not changed since COVID-19. Table 4.4 shows how many participants used a certain lead qualification medium.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
4. Design criteria		
4.1 Experience	20	19
4.2 Framework	4	5

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
5. Check lead against criteria		
5.1 Physical meeting	10	0
5.2 Video meeting	6	15
5.3 Internet	4	4
5.4 Call	5	5
5.4 Scraping tool	2	2
5.6 Email	3	4

Table 4.4: Lead qualification: Frequency of mediums

Design criteria(4)

The frequency of occurrence of the routine "design criteria" has not changed since COVID-19. All participants indicated they performed this routine before and during COVID-19.

The mediums of the routine: "design criteria" show little difference since COVID-19. Interviewee H mentioned that the design of the criteria was previously done through experience, but that changed to using a framework. 4 participants indicated that the qualification criteria have become stricter and 6 indicated that the qualification criteria have become lower.

Check lead against criteria (5)

The routine "Check lead against criteria" did not show a difference in how many participants performed this routine before and during COVID-19. All the participants indicated they performed this routine.

Table 4.4 shows the mediums during the routine: check lead against criteria. The frequency of the mediums pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 are presented. All physical qualification conversations are now done through video except for one participant who is doing this routine with the medium email. Because of the measures taken by the government to minimise physical contact, these physical meetings could not take place.

All 9 participants who changed from physical meetings to video meetings indicated it saved them a lot of time and that this routine will continue to be done via video calls. Participant S stated:*"But it is easier to speak to people in digital introductory interviews. I speak to people more quickly and therefore I can qualify more quickly."*

4.2.3 Preparation

The next step of the sales cycle that is going to be decomposed into routines and mediums is the preparation step. The preparation step is performed by 6 of the 24 participants pre-COVID-19 and that number has increased to 8 since COVID-19. From the coding of the interviews, 2 routines emerged: "research market" and "research customer". The routine research market is performed by 6 participants pre-COVID-19 and this has not changed. The routine research customer needs is performed by zero participants pre-COVID-19 and this has been included by 5 participants since COVID-19. Table 4.5 shows the preparation mediums pre-COVID-19 and how they have changed since COVID-19.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
6. Research market		
6.1 Internet	6	6

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
7. Research customer needs		
7.1 Internet	0	5
7.2 Previous conversation	0	4

Table 4.5: Preparation: Frequency of routines and mediums

Research customer needs (7)

It is eye-catching that 5 participants indicated that they have added this routine since COVID-19, as mentioned by participant F:*"It became more difficult to really shoot in a meeting and there was also much more preparation towards a customer. I had to have an answer to every question."* The routine "Research customer needs" has only been done since COVID-19, so it is not surprising that no mediums were used before COVID-19. The participants indicated they performed this routine using the mediums: internet and previous conversation.

4.2.4 Approach

The next step we will look at is the approach step. This step is performed by 23 of the 24 participants pre-COVID-19. The remaining participant indicated that they have added this step of the sales cycle since COVID-19. The two organisational routines in the approach step extracted from the interviews were: make first contact with prospect and set up a more formal meeting. The one participant who added this sales step since COVID-19 resulted in both routines going up in frequency by 1 since COVID-19. Table 4.6 shows the frequency of the mediums during the approach step and how the frequency of those has changed since COVID-19.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
8. Make first contact with prospect		
8.1 Call	16	17
8.2 Email	12	12

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
9. Set up a more formal meeting		
9.1 Physical meeting	13	0
9.2 Video meeting	8	24
9.3 Financial size dependent (physical/video)	2	0

Table 4.6: Approach: Frequency of mediums

Make first contact with prospect (8) & Set up a more formal meeting(9)

Coding the interviews reveals two routines in this sales step: "Make first contact with prospect" and "Set up more formal meeting with prospect". All participants indicated they performed these 2 routines during COVID. There was one participant that was not performing approach pre-COVID, interviewee G, who started performing both routines since COVID: *"The sales pipeline completely changed. We were really lazy, did not actively search for customers. Customers came to us. It shifted."* 11 interviewees mentioned that the first contact with a lead takes longer than before COVID-19. The medium "Call" of the routine "Make first contact with prospect" has increased by one since COVID-19. This is because of the participant who has been applying this routine since COVID-19. They are using calling as a medium to make the initial contact.

The second routine of the approach step is: set up a more formal meeting. In the routine "set up more formal meeting with prospect" it is interesting to look at what kind of meeting the participants want to set up with the prospects. When setting up a more formal meeting, one may ask for a meeting with a different type of medium ((video) call/physical meeting). Table 4.6 shows how this has shifted since COVID-19. Pre-COVID-19, more than half of the participants preferred a

physical meeting. Two participants indicated that the type of meeting depended on the financial size of the order. Since COVID-19, the preference of the medium for a formal meeting has changed. In the past, a physical meeting was often preferred, nowadays the first meeting is preferred through a video-call. Of the 13 participants who went from face-to-face meetings to an online meeting, 11 said it saved a lot of time because they could quickly get an indication of the lead's intention online. There was no need to travel all over the country to find out that there was no incentive to buy.

4.2.5 Presentation

The next step of the sales cycle we are going to have a look at is the presentation step. From the interviews, the following routines of this sales step were obtained: "create tailored visuals", "present visuals to prospect" and :"do a business review". Table 4.7 shows the amount of participants that are performing these mediums pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. The number of participants performing routines in the presentation step has not changed since COVID-19. Create tailored visuals and present visuals to prospect is done by all participants. One participant indicated they do a business review during the presentation step.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
10. Create tailored visuals		
10.1 Presentation	16	16
10.2 Demo	8	8

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
11. Present visuals to prospect		
11.1 Physical meeting	15	1
11.2 Video meeting	9	23
11.3 White board	0	3
11.4 Virtual tour	0	1
11.5 Brainstorm session	0	1

12. Do a business review

Table 4.7: Presentation: Frequency of mediums

Present visuals to prospect (11)

In the routine "Present visuals to prospect" different mediums are used. Pre-COVID-19, 15 participants presented their tailored visuals in a physical meeting. Because of COVID-19 measures, it is no longer possible to meet with large groups and the advice is to work at home as much as possible. Despite these rules, there is one participant who still presents the visuals in a physical meeting. During the

interviews, many participants complained about the online presentation. The complaints that were mentioned by almost everyone were: attendees in an online presentation are much easier distracted than in an offline presentation (16), it is more difficult to build a relationship when the presentation phase is online (16), a lack of non-verbal communication online (16) and the informal part hardly exists anymore in an online meeting (15).

14 participants mentioned that the digital meetings are low in interaction compared to physical meetings. The interviews did not show many participants incorporating interaction enhancing mediums. Three participants started using white boards, one is using a virtual tour and one participant is doing a brainstorming session during the presentation. Participant D : *"Interactive by combining a video call with, for example, a whiteboard"*.

4.2.6 Negotiation

The next step of the sales cycle we are going to discuss is the negotiation step. The interviews reveal that the negotiation step consists of the following routines: "agree on terms of sale" and "make a contract". The routine agree on terms of sale is performed by 24 participants and this has not changed since COVID-19. The routine create a contract is only performed by 2 participants, this also has not changed since COVID-19. Table 4.8 zooms in on the negotiation routines, showing the change in mediums since COVID-19 .

	Pre-COVID-19	**During-COVID-19**
13. Agree on terms of sale		
13.1 Physical meeting	16	0
13.2 Video meeting	7	23
13.3 Email	1	1

	Pre-COVID-19	**During-COVID-19**
14. Create a contract		
14.2 Legal department	2	2
14.1 Online tool	1	1

Table 4.8: Negotiation, frequency of mediums

Agree on terms of sale (13)

The first routine we will look at is: agree on terms of sale. All 24 participants indicated they performed this routine pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. No difference can be seen in the routines of the negotiation step since COVID-19.

Table 4.8 shows the mediums of the routine agree on sale. The mediums that are being used in the routine "agree on sale" according to the interviews were: physical meeting, video-call and email. Pre-COVID-19, 16 participants were

doing the negotiation physically. Since COVID-19, all 16 made the transition from physical negotiations to online negotiations. In an online negotiation, it is easier to stand your ground, 15 participants say. As stated by participant P: *"It is much easier to say no digitally because you have that distance"*.

Create a contract(14)

The second routine is make a contract. This routine is not mentioned very often. Only 2 of the 24 participants indicated they make a contract or let someone else make a contract. This can be seen as strange, since all 24 participants indicated that a contract is signed.

4.2.7 Signing

The next step of the sales cycle we are going to look at is the signing step. This step always comes after an agreement on a sale has been reached. All 24 participants indicated that this step is part of their sales cycle. This sales step consists of 2 routines: send the contract, receive the signature. 23 of the 24 participants mention that the contract is sent through an email and that it is signed online. Interviewee P had to make the switch from offline signing to online signing. The number of participants that are using certain mediums is displayed in table 4.9.

	Pre-COVID-19	**During-COVID-19**
15. Send the contract		
15.1 Email	23	24
15.2 In person	1	0

	Pre-COVID-19	**During-COVID-19**
16. Receive a signature		
16.1 Online tool	23	24
16.2 In person	0	1

Table 4.9: Signing, frequency of mediums

4.2.8 Follow-up

For some participants, the sales cycle ends after the contract is signed. The implementation phase starts. 9 participants indicated that there is another step after the signing step: the follow-up. From the interviews, it appears that there are 2 routines in the follow-up step: "Request Feedback" and "Upsell/Cross-sell". The table below shows the amount of participants that are using certain mediums and how this changed since COVID-19.

	Pre-COVID-19	During-COVID-19
17. Request feedback		
17.1 Email	4	2
17.2 Physical meeting	2	0
17.3 Call	1	1
17.4 Video meeting	0	2

18. Upsell/Cross-sell

Table 4.10: Follow-up, frequency of mediums

The routine "request feedback" was performed by 7 participants pre-COVID-19 but 2 participants dropped this routine, resulting in 5 participants performing this routine during COVID-19. 2 participants indicated they requested the feedback in person, this has changed to video meetings since COVID-19. Trying to upsell/cross-sell was performed by 2 participants pre-COVID-19 but this has disappeared as well as participant I state: *"The follow-up is performed less and less because of those barriers (res. no physical contact). And we are busy getting new leads in instead of upselling"*

4.3   Process of change

During the interviews, questions were asked about the changes in the sales cycle but also about how these changes had taken place. After analysing the responses, they could be visualised.The results are shown in graph 4.5.
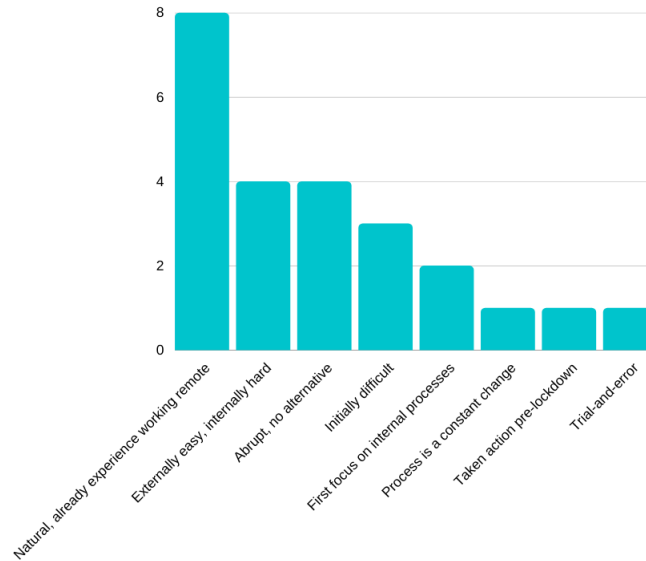
Figure 4.5: Answers to the question of how the changes in the sales cycle occurred

Eight participants indicated that the changes in the sales cycle went easily because they already had experience with working remotely. *"In the year before COVID, we mobilised the entire company and got laptops so we could work remote. This allowed us to sit throughout the building. This made it easy for us to switch to working from home."* as stated by participant E. 7 participants indicated that the internal changes were difficult. Four of them indicated that the external changes went naturally as stated by O *"I would say that externally, in the sales process, the change was pretty fluid. The internal processes were a lot more difficult."*. What is striking is that only one participant indicated that they saw the lockdown coming. Participant F mentioned: *"I do remember that a month before COVID, when you could see that a lockdown might be coming, we had all that remote working set up within two or three days."*

4.4 Impact of COVID

4.4.1 Roles in sales cycle

During the interview, there was also room to look at the roles involved in one typical sales cycle and whether that has changed since COVID-19. Of the 24 people interviewed, 22 indicated that nothing had changed in the roles involved in one typical sales cycle. The other two either saw a change unrelated to COVID-19 or because it is much easier to briefly involve a colleague in a typical sales cycle.

4.4.2 Sales cycle supported by technology

Another point that was asked about during the interviews was how the sales cycle was supported by technology and how this has changed since COVID. 12 of the 24 participants reported that the level of support technology in their sales cycle did not change. There are 8 participants who mentioned that the sales cycle is more supported by technology. 7 of these participants indicated that the technology is used to improve the lead generation step. The remaining interviewee mentioned that the technology is used to improve the presentation step. The last four participants indicated they did not use more technology, but that they had time to use the technology they were already using more efficiently.

4.4.3 Personal routines

During the interviews, participants were also asked about the change in personal routines in their sales cycle since COVID-19. Table 4.11 shows the changes in personal routines since COVID-19. 13 participants indicated that the meetings with the clients were of a shorter duration. As stated by participant R: *"A bit more straight to the point. Less about having a cup of coffee and more about doing real business"*. The second most given answer is: more effort to reach prospect. Participant I: *"Making contact has become more difficult because everyone is busy with appointments that have to be planned."*
5 Participants indicated they used way more social media in their sales cycle. By using social media, the 5 participants tried to keep up to date with the developments in their market. By being aware of the latest developments and getting involved in them, it is easier to remain relevant to potential clients. As stated by participant H *"For example, I look at LinkedIn a lot in order to respond to certain posts. That way I try to stay relevant in my posts"*.

Frequency	Changes personal routines
13x	Shorter meetings
12x	More effort to reach prospects
5x	More social media usage
4x	Less contact with colleagues
4x	Working more than pre-COVID-19
4x	More sympathy for struggling businesses

Table 4.11: Changes personal routines since COVID

4.5 Perceived effects of the changes of the sales cycle

The interviewees were asked what they thought were the positive and negative effects of the change on the sales cycle since COVID-19. Each participant has

given at least 1 positive and 1 negative effect, it was possible to name more perceived effects. For each perceived effect, the number of participants that mentioned it is indicated. Figure 4.6 shows the results.
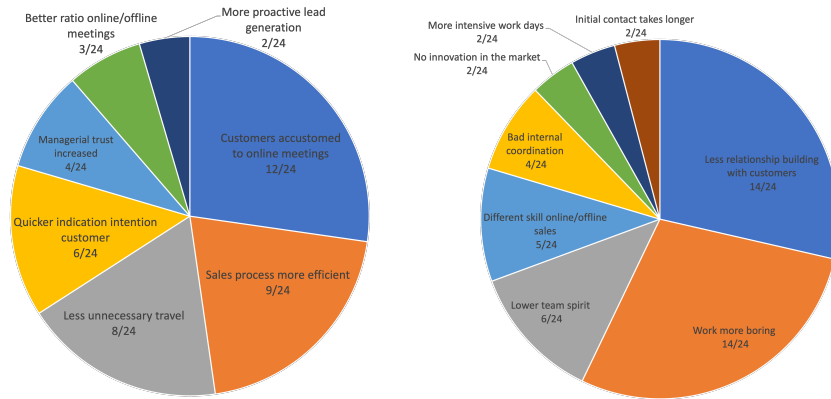

Figure 4.6: Perceived positive (L) & negative (R) effects

The perceived positive effect which was mentioned most often is that customers are more accustomed to online meetings. *"The fact that it (online meetings) is so accepted and prominent ensures this. It also shows that many travel movements are unnecessary. I think that is an advantage of COVID."* as stated by participant M. The second most frequently given answer also appears in this quote. Less travelling is seen as a positive effect.

The most frequently perceived negative effect given is that there was less relationship building with the customer and that the work of the participants has become more boring than pre-COVID-19. As participant B states : *"All of the face-to-face contact disappeared of course. Time wise that helped a lot but my job got more boring without all of these face to face contacts and events".* It was also frequently that there was less team spirit.

4.6 Permanent changes

As a last question, the participants were asked to predict what changes in the sales cycle would be permanent even when the COVID-19 virus and its limitations for the B2B sales cycle are gone. The table below shows the answers of the 24 participants.
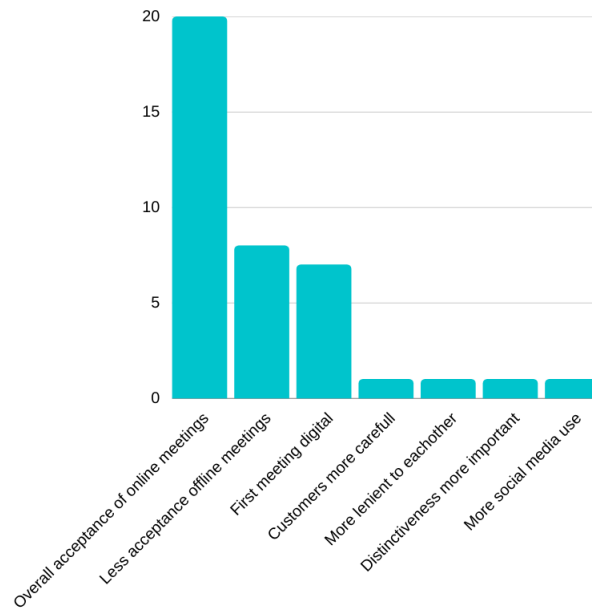
Figure 4.7: Permanent changes sales process according to the interviewees

83% Of the interviewees agreed that the overall acceptance of online meetings is permanent. Eight interviewees indicated that there will be less acceptance for offline meetings once the COVID-19 measures are reduced. Participant A stated: *"I think those executives are less open to having lunch because they think it's not efficient. That will be an area of tension"*.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the main question and the three sub questions of this research as stated in the introduction. This will be done in relation to the literature review and results. The main research question is:

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the B2B sales capability?

And the three sub questions are:

1. *What are the routines of b2b sales prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic*

2. *How are routines of b2b sales being transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic*

3. *What are the perceived effects of the b2b sales transformation due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Due to the duration of this study, it was possible to send follow-up questions to participants. These questions reflect on the findings of this study, the answers will be briefly discussed in the discussion. These questions were sent out on June 24 to 24 participants, six of whom responded. By 24 June, all COVID-19 measures had been dropped in The Netherlands [120]. The questions can be found in Appendix C.

5.1 Sales cycle perceived as more efficient and less enjoyable

The results show that the participants are positive about the changes in the sales cycle on an organisational level but, they are negative about the changes in the sales cycle on a personal level. The changes in the sales cycle since COVID-19 enable the participants to do their work more efficiently. Despite this growth in

efficiency, the participants are negative about the effects on their daily activities.

The results show that this efficiency in the sales cycle is due to the disappearance of the informal part of meetings and the general acceptance of online meetings. As a result, meetings are much shorter, less time is spent on travelling towards the meetings and it is easier to plan an appointment with several people in an online environment instead of an offline environment. This efficiency in the sales cycle is also described in the literature. Ordonez also discovered a decline in the informal part of online meetings [80]. A possible reason for this is the rapid change in the behaviour of customers in the B2B market since to COVID-19. Relationship building is perceived as less important, hence the informal part of a meeting becoming shorter. It is claimed that customers want to make a fast, yet right purchase decision[66].

Participants experienced the sales cycle as more efficient since COVID-19. This result may have been biased by the timing of these interviews. All the interviews were conducted in 2021, a whole year later than the first COVID-19 case and the first COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands. The sales staff and customers have had a year to adjust to the new sales cycle. The cycle is perceived as more efficient by the participants, but whether this was the case in the first months of COVID-19 is doubtful. The measures came suddenly and had to be acted upon quickly. The economy was also affected by COVID-19, the Dutch economy shrank by 3.8% in 2020. In 2021 (the year of the interviews), the Dutch economy grew by 4.8%, which meant that it had largely recovered[71].

Whereas the participants are positive about the changes in the sales cycle on an organisational level, the participants are negative about the changes on a personal level. The changes have a negative effect on their enjoyment of their work. Due to the COVID-19 measures, all physical meetings were cancelled and the switch was made to online meetings. In online meetings with colleagues and customers, there is less room for the informal part, as the meetings are much more businesslike. Remote working allowed work to be done more efficiently but reduced the enjoyment of the work. This is in line with a study by Rubin et al. who showed that face-to-face contact is unnecessary for the actual performance of a task but increases job satisfaction[98]. A lot of research has been done on job satisfaction in sales. It has been shown that the job satisfaction of a salesperson impacts potential turnover and organisational commitment [58][13][9].

In the follow-up questions, the participants were asked whether the efficiency of the current sales cycle is higher than the sales process pre-COVID-19. 83% indicated that the sales cycle has become more efficient. Participant J states *"it is less about how efficient we can be and more about how aligned the customer is internally on their digital road map"*. This alignment between the buying process of the customer and the sales process of the seller is also seen in the literature as an important challenge [66] [123][67].

It is worth mentioning that the context of this research is very unusual. It is a very uncertain time when participants may worry about their own health, the health of those around them, their jobs and income. Apart from working at home, the participants also experienced social distancing and isolation in their private life. This could have impacted the perception of working from home negatively.

5.2 Increasingly important role of digital technology in B2B sales often ignored

In B2C sales, it had been apparent for years that digital technology was playing an increasingly important role. This trend also started to take place in B2B sales and has been accelerated by COVID-19[97]. Despite this acceleration, it is clear from the interviews that little digital technology is applied and when it is applied, no effort was put into optimising it.

During COVID-19, the use of video calls increased enormously. This is not surprising, since physical meetings could no longer take place. What is noticeable is that there are many complaints about the video calls, especially the lack of interaction and the lack of nonverbal communication. Despite these complaints, only a few participants made any effort to solve this. White boards and brainstorm sessions were successfully used by a few to increase the interaction, but the vast majority did not put any effort in improving their digital meetings. This may be due to the temporary nature of COVID-19, which could mean that people did not want to put effort into digital meetings because they thought the sales would all be physical within a short period of time.

The second most frequently mentioned digital technology that is being adopted in the B2B sales cycle is social media (3x). The lead generation stage had to change a lot since COVID-19 due to the social events which could not continue in a physical form. The digital solution did not turn out to be a success, so an alternative had to be sought. This could not be solved with a CRM system or an automated sales cycle because they did not give any form of interaction. Many customers missed the interaction with the sales staff and became more active on social media [40]. Social media was addressed by participants as the solution to networking during COVID-19 time.

In B2C, the trend towards social media has been underway for some time, but their social media is mainly used for advertising and not for networking [95]. This has to do with the difference between B2C and B2B. B2C communication responds to the customer's emotional choice. In the B2B sector, there is no personal emotion involved in a purchase and it is all rational [93]. This requires

a different approach to social media. Instead of advertising, a B2B salesperson should become active on social media. This should be done by disseminating relevant digital content through social media [1]. Thought leadership positively influences customer relationship performance, demonstrates cutting-edge competence and brand performance[69]. Only one participant is a thought leader on social media.

Apart from social media, self-service sales channels (a cost efficient way of doing sales without human interaction at the expense of the relationship with the customer) is seen in the literature as a trend in B2B sales [10]. However, this trend is not seen at all in the interviews. This may be related to the type of product or service the participants are selling. A lot of the products sold by the interviewees are software developments or service. If a product or service is reasonably "simple", there is often no need for difficult interactions between buyer and seller and the sales can be arranged via a self-service channel. When a product is more complex and needs more custom work (such as software developments or IT service), difficult interactions have to take place more often. Self-service channels are not effective when difficult interactions are needed[106]. In B2C, self-service is already more the norm than the exception and is expected to become much more important in B2B sales as well. But for very expensive products or complicated products, it is still necessary to have human contact with the customer.

Another transition that is seen much less in the data is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the sales cycle. One third of the participants indicated they have started using tools with AI since COVID. All these participants indicated that the AI is used only in the lead generation stage. The premise of AI in B2B sales is to transform massive amounts of data into information for better knowledge production and knowledge management and ultimately taking over (some) organisational routines from human sales staff [81]. The use of AI in the B2B sales cycle is still in its early stages, but with the accelerated digitisation since the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing focus on how AI can add value to the sales cycle. The AI still being in its infancy can be a reason why it does not often feature in the interviews. Although the AI cannot (yet) take over every routine from a salesperson, it can support the salesperson in every routine. Allowing the salesperson to manage their time more efficiently [82]. The literature is still divided whether AI will take over the entire sales cycle or remain in a supporting role [82].

5.3 Internal communication suffers from poor preparation

In the sales cycle, there are definitely differences to be seen since COVID-19. How these changes came about varies from company to company. A division can be made between companies that have already (partly) made a digital transformation and companies where everything was still done the "old-fashioned way". The digital transformation of a complex B2B sales cycle is a difficult event that requires a lot of time and energy [97].

One third of the participants indicate that a digitally transformation process had already taken place in their company pre-COVID-19. The companies that had already (partly) digital transformed their sales cycle pre-COVID-19 could do this with much more time and energy compared to the companies who had to do it in a hurry. Because of the drastic changes in the world due to COVID-19, many companies had to rush their digital transformation of the sales processes. It is not surprising that all participants whose processes were already (partially) digitised mentioned that the process of change in their sales cycle has been very easy. For the other participants, this change was less successful, they simply had much less time to do the digital transformation.

Because there was little time to transform, we saw that a company had to make a choice to start with the digital transformation of either the internal communication or their sales cycle (external communication). The results show that companies with high-demand products or services focused on the digital transformation of their sales cycle first. Companies whose sales have stagnated for a while started to focus on the digital transformation of their internal communication first. After all, there was little demand and therefore little need to focus on their sales cycle.

It is striking that the sales employees who started their digital transformation with the external communication first are complaining about the internal communication. One participant compared its company with a swimming duck. Above the water, the duck seemed to swim calmly, but to the outside world, it was impossible to see how much effort it took for the duck to stay above the water. Because of the shortage of time, companies do not manage to bring their internal processes to the same level as the external processes. As a result, the company appears to be doing well for the customer but internally there are many problems, especially with communication. In small companies, this may work out well in the long run because there is less internal communication and process. Larger companies, however, run into problems because their internal processes and communication are a lot more complex. The companies that have focused on internal communication first and only then on external communication missed out on sales at the beginning of the COVID-19 period, but in the long run they have to work significantly less hard to stay above water.

A reason for companies to not immediately work on the digital transformation of their internal processes is the temporary nature of COVID-19 [44]. After all, turnover is made in the sales cycle and not in the internal communication. So if there is little time to digitally transform the company and the situation is back to normal in no time, it is better to focus on the digital transformation of the sales cycle, many thought. There was one company that realised that the pandemic could stay in the country for a longer period of time and set up a COVID-19 committee. This COVID-19 committee aimed to smoothen the transition of the internal communication. In large companies this can have an added value but in a small company it is not necessary because there is not that much internal communication.

In the follow-up questions, participants were asked whether they thought their sales force was well prepared for an eventual new shock. 100% indicated that they were better prepared for the switch from working at home to working in the office. As stated by participant B: *"We're definitely better prepared to pivot between digital, in-person and hybrid work as needed"*. If there is an exogenous shock similar to COVID-19, they are well prepared, but whether the participants are trully prepared for other exogenous shocks remains to be seen.

5.4   COVID-19 affects the execution of routines

The world has changed a lot since COVID-19 and B2B sales have not been unaffected either. Through the interviews it can be indicated where these changes in the sales cycle occurred. At organisational routine level, few differences can be seen since COVID-19. The deeper one dives into organisational routines, the more differences emerge. The differences can already be seen at sub-routine level, but the biggest differences can be seen at the medium level and in the personal routines.

As mentioned in the literary review, an organisational routine consists of 3 parts: ostensive, performative and artifact. The ostensive part is the abstractly described organisational routine and the performative part is the actual actions performed by the actor. Because this research is based on interviews, it is possible to determine the ostensive part of the routines but not the performative part. To examine the performative part, it is necessary to shadow the participants to see what actions they actually perform [37].

For the ostensive part of the organisational routines, it can be concluded from the interviews that there is stability. Whether the performative part is stable as well is doubtful. With reasonable certainty it can be concluded that all actions in the performative part that involve physical contact have changed. This was no longer possible due to the measures by the government. This paradox between change and stability within organisational routines is also described in the literature. By

dividing the routine into ostensive and performative parts, stability and change can occur simultaneously[85].

Farjoun suggested that the ostensive aspect of a routine remains stable over time, whereas the performative aspect is highly diverse [35]. The interviewees have all been with their companies for at least two years and all companies have existed for at least five years. The routines have gone through many iterations and stability may have developed on the ostensive part.

The mediums and personal routines have changes the most since COVID-19. These levels are closer to the performative part of a routine (individual actions performed by individuals). The performative aspect of a routine is known for its constant changes, and certainly with an exogenous shock like a pandemic, it can be expected that there are many changes at this level [85][36].

Another insight that stands out when looking at the results is that participants whose businesses were thriving during the COVID-19 pandemic were performing less organisational routines in their sales cycle compared to participants whose businesses were struggling because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference between the companies that thrived during COVID-19 and those that were struggling lies mainly in the type of product or service they provide. The companies whose product or service were growing enormously in demand were flooded with enquiries. This resulted in a shift of focus within the sales cycle. The sales staff were so busy with all the purchase requests that there was no time to put energy into the lead generation and follow-up phase. This resulted in fewer routines being performed by these sales people.

Whenever a company is in a highly competitive environment, the difference can be made through the sales cycle [24]. Companies that were flooded with applications have a clear competitive advantage. The difference no longer needs to be made through the sales cycle and the salespeople can still achieve the same result with fewer routines in their sales cycle. This works as long as this competitive advantage remains. For those companies whose sales staff perform fewer routines, there is a danger that their sales cycle will develop less than that of their competitors. Because certain routines are no longer performed, there will be no innovation of these routines. This can result in a competitive disadvantage when other companies reach the same level in terms of product or service.

5.5   Recommendations for practice

Since COVID-19, much has changed in the work of the sales staff. In the future, much more will change in B2B sales (e.g. AI). The change since COVID-19 has led to resistance, because many people no longer enjoy their work and want to return to their "old job". It is up to the sales manager to address this resistance

to change and help them manage these changes. Not only the COVID-19 related changes but also for future changes in the sales cycle.

The role of technology in the sales cycle has changed a lot in recent times. It is advisable to look at what role technology will play in the sales cycle after COVID-19 and train salespeople accordingly. By making good use of technology in the sales cycle, an advantage over the competition can be achieved.

The follow-up step of the sales cycle must be contemplated. During COVID-19, even fewer participants performed this step. Sales employees should be encouraged in reaching out to customers and identify future areas of value creation and discuss already delivered values. This leads to more customer satisfaction and possible cross-sell/ up-sell.

Finally, the sales force must become flexible. COVID-19 has shown how quickly circumstances can change. Not only the external processes must be able to switch easily between physical and digital, but also the internal processes must become flexible. Many companies have been woken up by COVID-19 and have spent a lot of money on the digitisation of the internal and external processes. In some cases, this has been done in a quick and dirty way. It is advisable to spend more time on this after COVID-19 so that it is sustainable for the future.

5.6 Recommendations for science

In this study, the choice was made to conduct multiple interviews at multiple companies. Through these interviews, it was examined how B2B sales have changed since COVID-19. This was done through the lens of organisational capabilities and routines. This worked well to investigate the ostensive part of the routine, but the performative part could not be investigated this way [103].

If future research is conducted into capabilities through the lens of organisational routines, it is advisable to make it a case study. By observing sales employees, the ostensive part can be looked at as well as the performative part. This allows for a better picture of the differences in organisational routines and ultimately the capabilities. Also, it is better to look at one specific company instead of all the different companies when identifying organisational routines. By examining several sales people from one company, it is possible to better investigate what the routines are and compare them with each other.

5.7 Limitation

In retrospect, several limitations can be attributed to this research. To start with, the vast majority of the interviewee's were dutch and the companies the participants work for were also predominantly dutch. This can lead to a

cultural bias in which the data mainly provides dutch routines and mediums. Another limitation is the time span in which the interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted in 2021, one year after the first COVID-19 case in the Netherlands. In 2021, the economy was already recovering and the participants had already had a long time to adjust to the new situation. Finally, due to the chosen research method, there was less focus on the performative part of routines, as a result of which there was less information on this part of the routines.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

B2C sales have been the key focus in many digital transformation projects. B2B sales have remained more conservative and focused until recently on relationship building through physical meetings. Exactly those physical meetings could not take place anymore due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within companies, the role of the sales departments has become increasingly important in gaining competitive advantage. The aim of this research was to explore if and how B2B sales capabilities changed since COVID-19. To get to this macro perspective, the first focus was placed at the micro perspective: organisational routines. Organisational routines are regarded as the building blocks of capabilities. The data was collected through 24 interviews with B2B sales staff who had experience of the profession before and during COVID-19. After processing the interviews and analysing the data, it was possible to discuss the guided questions and the main question.

The interviews showed that on an organisational routine level there were no huge differences since COVID-19, but when looking deeper into the routine, big changes can be seen. The greatest changes can be seen at the medium level and at the personal routine level. The use of digital technology has gained a much larger role in the sales cycle. How a sales force implements these digital technologies can be decisive in gaining competitive advantage through the sales cycle.

On an organisational level, participants were very satisfied with the changes in the sales process, the changes enabled them to do their sales work more efficiently. On a personal level, however, participants were much less enthusiastic about the changes in their sales process. Due to the changes, there is less relationship building with customers, a lower team spirit and the participants find their work more boring. It is therefore important to ensure that this effectiveness in the sales process does not come at the expense of the enthusiasm of the sales staff. A sales force with little motivation can make even the most efficient sales process inefficient.

When looking at how these changes have taken place, there is a big difference between companies that have already had a digital transformation pre-COVID-19 and those that have not. By not doing this during a pandemic, the companies had the time to properly digitise their internal and external processes without any time pressure and were thus better protected against an exogenous shock such as a pandemic. The companies that had not yet gone through a digital transformation before COVID-19 had to do the digital transformation in a hurry. The participants who had to do the digital transformation quickly still experience disadvantages. The internal coordination is not nearly as good as it was before COVID-19.

After answering the sub-questions, it will be possible to look at the changes in B2B sales capabilities since COVID-19. First, it is becoming increasingly important that the opportunities created by digital technologies for the B2B sales force are actually exploited. Secondly, it is more important than ever to manage the resistance of the salespeople to change. Thirdly, in a world where there is less and less physical contact, the digital transformation of internal communications has become much more important to ensure that there is no information asymmetry within a sales team. Lastly, account management (relationship building) has become less important during COVID-19. This change in B2B sales capabilities takes time and effort. However, as a company, it is necessary to respond to these changing capabilities in order to gain a competitive advantage. Not only during COVID-19, but also in the "new normal" in which the sales process will undoubtedly continue to change.

6.1   Further research

Because this study used interviews as the data collection method, the focus of the study mainly was on the ostensive part of the organisational routines. For further research, one could accompany the B2B sales staff during the sales cycle to observe the performative part. The actions that the participants actually perform. By looking at the performative part, it is possible to examine even more closely how B2B sales capabilities have changed. The conservative B2B market was already changing slowly and COVID-19 has accelerated this transition enormously. The changes that have taken place are just the tip of the iceberg. Especially now that AI is slowly but surely being used in the B2B sales process, B2B sales capabilities will only change more in the future.

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