



AI Impact on Sales Skills

The Implications of Artificial Intelligence on the Required Skill Set for the
B2B Sales Workforce

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ABSTRACT

Title: AI Impact on Sales Skills

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This dissertation investigates how artificial intelligence (AI) is redefining the skill set of B2B sales professionals. Guided by human-capital theory, it addresses three questions: which skills matter today, how AI alters them, and what this means for tomorrow's sales role. Twenty-seven expert interviews across European SaaS, fintech, energy and consulting firms were analyzed with Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis to map 23 competencies into four clusters.

Findings show that AI displaces routine analytics and administration while amplifying high-touch capabilities: relationship-building, active listening, commercial acumen and strategic orchestration grow in importance; operational AI literacy, especially prompt engineering, emerges as a new meta-skill; and adaptability and continuous learning become critical. AI lifts productivity yet introduces risks of cognitive dependence and skill decay if used uncritically.

The study concludes that AI is an augments, not a replacer of human skills: sustainable advantage will accrue to organizations that treat algorithms as collaborative "colleagues" and simultaneously invest in soft-skill coaching and prompt-engineering training. These insights extend human-capital theory to the AI era and offer managers a roadmap for up-skilling sales teams while safeguarding human judgment.

Keywords: Sales Skills, Artificial Intelligence, B2B Sales, Skill Shift, Human Capital, AI-Human Collaboration, Evolution of Sales Role

RESUMO

Título: AI Impact on Sales Skills

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Esta dissertação investiga como a inteligência artificial (IA) está a redefinir o conjunto de competências dos profissionais de vendas B2B. Guiada pela teoria do capital humano, o estudo aborda três questões: quais as competências que são importantes hoje, como a IA altera-as e o que isso significa para o papel das vendas no futuro. Vinte e sete entrevistas com especialistas em empresas europeias de SaaS, fintech, energia e consultoria foram analisadas usando a análise temática de Braun e Clarke (2006) para mapear 23 competências em quatro grupos.

Os resultados mostram que a IA substitui a análise e a administração rotineiras, ao mesmo tempo que amplifica as capacidades de alto contacto: a construção de relações, a escuta ativa, a perspicácia comercial e a orquestração estratégica ganham importância; a literacia operacional em IA, especialmente a engenharia de *prompts*, surge como uma nova meta-competência; e a adaptabilidade e a aprendizagem contínua tornam-se críticas. A IA aumenta a produtividade, mas introduz riscos de dependência cognitiva e deterioração das competências se for utilizada de forma acrítica.

O estudo conclui que a IA é um potenciador, não um substituto das competências humanas: a vantagem sustentável será obtida pelas organizações que tratam os algoritmos como “colegas” colaborativos e, simultaneamente, investem em *coaching* de competências sociais e formação em engenharia de *prompts*. Estas ideias estendem a teoria do capital humano à era da IA e oferecem aos gestores um roteiro para melhorar as competências das equipas de vendas, salvaguardando ao mesmo tempo o julgamento humano.

Palavras-chave: Competências de vendas, Inteligência Artificial, Vendas B2B, Mudança de competências, Capital humano, Colaboração IA-Humana, Evolução da função de vendas

DECLARATION

For this thesis, I used artificial intelligence tools specifically for proofreading, grammar editing, and overall text refinement. While AI partly assisted in synthesizing insights from the academic literature, it did not in any way replace my own careful and comprehensive reading of the original papers.

All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, evaluated, and revised to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with academic standards. The intellectual content of this thesis, including the formulation of ideas, development of arguments, structural organization, and analytical interpretations, is entirely original and my own work.

I also acknowledge the valuable guidance, feedback, and insights provided by my supervisor, which helped and supported my critical thinking and analysis throughout this project.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence
AGI	Artificial General Intelligence
NLP	Natural Language Processing
B2B	Business-to-Business
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
SFA	Sales Force Automation
HCT	Human Capital Theory
RBV	Resource-Based View
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TTF	Task-Technology Fit
SBTC	Skill-Biased Technological Change
KSAOs	Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other characteristics
SaaS	Software as a Service
IT	Information Technology
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
RFP	Request for Proposal
VBS	Value-Based Selling

1. INTRODUCTION

By 2030, almost 40% of current professional skill sets are predicted to become obsolete, driven primarily by rapid technological advancements, particularly artificial intelligence and big data (World Economic Forum, 2025). This profound shift poses significant risks and opportunities for business leaders, especially those managing complex B2B sales operations (Durth et al., 2023; Moradi & Dass, 2022; Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022). As the workforce transformation accelerates, approximately half of today's activities could be automated between 2030 and 2060, signaling a much shorter timeframe for adaptation than previously anticipated (Chui et al., 2023).

The rapid adoption of frontier technologies, such as generative AI (GenAI), highlights the necessity for companies to urgently re-evaluate their talent strategies (Bankins et al., 2024; Durth et al., 2023). Firms have recognized the inevitability of widescale AI integration, reflected by projected corporate investments surpassing \$250 billion in 2024 (Maslej et al., 2025; Mayer et al., 2025). Business leaders, pressured to deliver tangible returns on these investments, are increasingly focused on the practical implementation and strategic prioritization of AI technologies (Mayer et al., 2025; Singla et al., 2025).

The stakes are particularly high in B2B sales, a sector primed for significant disruption and potential gains, as AI may alter all stages of the sales process, from prospecting to follow-up (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Davenport et al., 2020; Dierks & Deveau, 2025). GenAI alone is projected to unlock an incremental \$0.8 trillion to \$1.2 trillion in productivity across sales and marketing functions, profoundly reshaping the competitive landscape (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025). Companies that swiftly leverage AI to automate routine tasks, enhance decision-making capabilities and empower sales professionals will experience competitive advantages, including improved sales efficiency (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025; Moradi & Dass, 2022; Yee et al., 2024). Conversely, organizations slow to adapt risk falling behind competitors already experiencing measurable performance gains from AI-enabled selling strategies (Durth et al., 2023; Moradi & Dass, 2022).

Yet despite widespread enthusiasm and significant investments, many business leaders remain uncertain about precisely which sales skills will thrive and which will become redundant (Dierks & Deveau, 2025; Moradi & Dass, 2022). For instance, skills such as data-driven prospecting, strategic relationship management, and complex deal orchestration are likely to become more valuable, whereas routine tasks such as basic lead qualification are increasingly

vulnerable to automation (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025; Moradi & Dass, 2022; Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018). Additionally, the investments and complexity associated with talent reskilling, workflow restructuring, and cultural adjustments pose substantial management challenges, further highlighting the critical importance of clear, evidence-based guidance (Hussin et al., 2024; Tamayo et al., 2023).

This research addresses these critical points directly with a focus on identifying and analyzing the specific skill shifts impacted by AI within the B2B sales domain by exploring the following key dimensions:

1. What are the most essential sales skills and capabilities in the B2B sector currently?
2. How do the identified skill requirements of sales professionals change due to the integration of AI applications?
3. How does AI influence the B2B sales role of tomorrow?

The human capital theory serves as the theoretical framework for this research. Answering these questions is crucial for gaining insights into theoretical and managerial developments to support businesses in achieving long-term growth and building a competitive advantage in an environment driven by artificial intelligence.

This thesis is structured as follows: In Chapter 2, the relevant literature is discussed which provides information on the sales, sales skills, AI, the influence of AI on skills and the effect of AI on sales jobs as well as the definitions of these terms. It also considers human capital theory as a theoretical framework. Chapter 3 explains the methods used in this study such as sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings in several steps: first, it establishes the sales context; then, it examines how skills are changing; next, it identifies the technological drivers behind these shifts; then, it weighs the benefits and risks of adopting AI; and finally, it outlines actionable recommendations for practitioners. Chapter 5 discusses the results in context of the existing literature and the HCT, pointing out the research's contributions, the practical implications, limitations, and the areas that require further research. To conclude, Chapter 6 gives a brief overview of the main findings and their implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Clarifying the main concepts: sales and AI

2.1.1 The concept of sales

The definition of professional selling has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, selling was understood as a linear, transactional process between a buyer and seller (Hartmann et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2019). This was often described as an "interactive, personal, paid promotional approach" (Dixon & Tanner, 2012, p. 9), framed within a multi-step model focused on the salesperson persuading a customer to buy a product (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Haas et al., 2012). This transactional view, which emphasized the salesperson's role in manipulating buyers for self-serving outcomes, is now considered outdated and too narrow for contemporary markets (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018). The increasing complexity of customer demands, technology, and competition has made it insufficient for modern, complex markets (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018).

A more recent understanding reframes selling as "the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context" (Dixon & Tanner, 2012, p. 10). That view changes the emphasis from just selling a product to the co-creation of value, which recognizes selling as a nonlinear activity where several stakeholders and processes are involved (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). Approaches like value-based selling (VBS) illustrate that concept. VBS involves systematically identifying, quantifying, communicating, and verifying customer value with a distinct focus on the financial implications for the customer's business (Terho et al., 2012; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). These approaches indicate a major change in how companies focus on delivering integrated solutions aimed at reducing customer uncertainty rather than selling individual products (Singh et al., 2019; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018). Within this updated understanding, the salesperson's role is transformed from that of a vendor to an "architect of change" (Dixon & Tanner, 2012, p. 12) who collaboratively diagnoses business challenges and co-creates valuable solutions with the customer (Dixon & Tanner, 2012).

Along these lines, a more systemic definition grounded in service-dominant logic has emerged (Hartmann et al., 2018). This advanced perspective defines selling as "the interaction between

actors aimed at creating and maintaining thin crossing points, the locations at which service can be efficiently exchanged for service, through the ongoing alignment of institutional arrangements and the optimization of relationships" (Hartmann et al., 2018, p. 2). Selling is here conceptualized as the institutional work accomplished by a wide ecosystem of actors, and not only by salespeople, to reconstruct the rules, norms, and practices that facilitate complex value co-creation (Hartmann et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2019). This view highlights that selling unfolds over time within complex systems, which include a large number of cross-functional and cross-organizational actors (Hartmann et al., 2018; Marcos Cuevas, 2018).

2.1.2 The evolution of sales skills

Sales skills are defined within academic literature as a "learned proficiency at performing the necessary [job] tasks" (Peesker et al., 2022, p. 18), distinguishing them from personal attributes, given personality traits or personal factors (Peesker et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2011). Historically, research on sales performance often focused more on salesperson traits than on trainable skills, but a contemporary understanding emphasizes a granular classification of skills to better predict success (Peesker et al., 2022). One framework organizes these skills into cognitive, functional, and social competencies (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Verbeke et al., 2011). These are complemented by contemporary sales skills, which together form a comprehensive view of a salesperson's required skillset (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Peesker et al., 2022).

First, cognitive and functional skills represent the foundational understanding and skills that a salesperson has. Cognitive competence refers to the information and understanding received through experience and exercising, such as deep technical and product knowledge, customer insight, and market awareness (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Verbeke et al., 2011). This expertise allows salespeople to act as "knowledge brokers" (Verbeke et al., 2011, p. 422) who can effectively diagnose complex customer problems (Peesker et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2011).

Second, functional competence refers to the demonstrable, task-oriented skills needed to execute the sales process (Ohiomah et al., 2020). This includes classic salesmanship skills like prospecting, presenting solutions, and closing deals, which are consistently identified as critical for success (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Peesker et al., 2022). It also includes customer orientation, a strategic focus on understanding and satisfying customer needs, which is a cornerstone for building lasting relationships and driving performance (Ohiomah et al., 2020).

Third, social competence, or interpersonal skill, is the ability to effectively manage relationships and interactions (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Verbeke et al., 2011). Core components include strong communication, active listening, high emotional intelligence and empathy, which are essential for building rapport and establishing trust with customers (Kidwell et al., 2021; Peesker et al., 2022). One especially important skill in this area is adaptive selling, which is characterized as the capability to change one's sales behavior and strategies according to certain situational signals that are recognized during a conversation with a customer (Locander et al., 2020; Ohiomah et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Verbeke et al., 2011). This adaptability is essential for navigating the diverse needs and personalities of different buyers and is strongly linked to higher performance outcomes (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Verbeke et al., 2011). Building on this, recent research highlights that effective consultative practice requires adaptability as well as the ability to frame and scope ambiguous problems while engaging customers with empathy (Baer et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2008; Wieseke et al., 2012).

In addition to these three categories, the modern business landscape, characterized by technological advancements, information overload and increased product complexity, requires a contemporary and expanded set of skills (Peesker et al., 2022). Analytical skills have emerged as a top-ranked competency sought by recruiters, enabling salespeople to leverage data for deeper customer insights and more efficient pipeline management (Peesker et al., 2022). Concurrently, technology skills for mastering customer relationship management (CRM) systems, sales force automation tools, and social media platforms are now considered essential (Peesker et al., 2022). With the rise of team-based and solution selling, collaboration skills have become vital for coordinating with internal colleagues, external partners, and customers to co-create value (Peesker et al., 2022; Teece et al., 1997). This is a particularly significant factor in a complex sales environment, where having good internal relationships and being able to work efficiently in cross-functional teams is important to utilize relational and technical skills of the team members (Steward et al., 2010).

2.1.3 Definition and typologies of AI

Artificial intelligence is described as “a system’s ability to interpret external data correctly, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation” (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019, p. 5). It represents a *moving frontier* of computing advancements where machines are made to behave in ways that would be considered

intelligent if performed by a human (Hillebrand et al., 2025). This includes cognitive functions like perceiving, reasoning, learning, and problem-solving (Rai et al., 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). The core capability that distinguishes contemporary AI from earlier technologies, such as deterministic expert systems, is its ability to learn from experience and adjust its behavior based on data, often without needing explicit programming (Hillebrand et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2019). There are currently two major subsections of AI. Generative AI refers to AI systems that create new content by learning patterns from vast datasets, enabling them to perform complex tasks such as reasoning and strategy development without explicit programming (Doshi et al., 2025; Hillebrand et al., 2025). The most recent addition is agentic AI, which describes autonomous software agents that can perceive their environment and make flexible, proactive decisions to achieve goals ranging from simple reactions to fully autonomous actions (Baird & Maruping, 2021; Hillebrand et al., 2025).

While futuristic visions of "strong" or "artificial general intelligence" (AGI) able to perform any task better than humans do not yet exist, today's "narrow" AI excels at a wide range of specific tasks (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Hillebrand et al., 2025). These systems lack consciousness or intrinsic motivation, necessitating human direction to set their goals (Hillebrand et al., 2025).

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the potential capabilities of AI in the context of applying it to business operations, AI can be classified into different archetypes (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). A useful framework categorizes AI into three intelligences: mechanical, thinking, and feeling (Huang et al., 2019; Huang & Rust, 2021). Mechanical AI automates repetitive and routine tasks to achieve standardization and consistency (Huang et al., 2019; Huang & Rust, 2021). Thinking AI processes data to arrive at new conclusions or decisions, leveraging machine learning and deep learning to recognize patterns in complex, often unstructured data (Huang et al., 2019; Huang & Rust, 2021). Feeling AI is designed for two-way human interaction and the analysis of human emotion, using technologies like natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis (Huang et al., 2019; Huang & Rust, 2021). Currently, true feeling AI is still developing, and many applications use thinking AI to process and interpret emotional data (Huang & Rust, 2021).

2.2 The impact of AI on skills and processes

These features enable an evaluation of the effects on skills and processes. The use of artificial intelligence in the workplace has changed the nature of the jobs and the skills needed by human

workers in a very profound way (Holm & Lorenz, 2022; Zirar et al., 2023). The literature reveals a dual impact of AI, which can either automate tasks, thereby substituting for human skills, or augment human abilities, creating new forms of human-AI collaboration (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Zirar et al., 2023). This distinction is crucial for understanding how AI reshapes skill requirements across various sectors (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Zirar et al., 2023). Historically, computerization was confined to routine, rule-based tasks (Frey & Osborne, 2017). However, recent advances in machine learning and big data have expanded AI's reach to non-routine cognitive and manual tasks, impacting a wide array of jobs from transportation to legal services (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Kanazawa et al., 2025). AI now performs tasks requiring analytical intelligence, pattern recognition, and even creative generation, once considered the exclusive domain of human knowledge workers (Berente et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2024; Kanazawa et al., 2025). A growing body of empirical evidence strongly indicates that such AI adoption boosts overall productivity (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Czarnitzki et al., 2023; Wilson & Daugherty, 2018; Yang, 2022).

A key theme is the skill-biased nature of AI's impact, with outcomes varying significantly between high-skilled and low-skilled workers (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Jia et al., 2024). GenAI tools have proven to offer a disproportionate boost in productivity for workers who are less skilled and have less experience, by giving them real-time suggestions and integrating expert knowledge into their work routines (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025). This not only can speed up the learning process for beginners but also enables them to work at the same level as the more experienced co-workers (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025). Studies, such as one on taxi drivers using an AI navigation system, show that AI can narrow the productivity gap between high- and low-skilled individuals by substituting for the experience-based knowledge of experts (Kanazawa et al., 2025). Conversely, the most experienced and highest-skilled workers often see minimal productivity gains and, in some cases, a slight decline in output quality when using AI assistance (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025).

The primary implication of AI's growing capabilities is a significant shift in the portfolio of skills valued in the labor market (Huang & Rust, 2018). As AI automates analytical and codifiable tasks, there is a rising premium on "softer," uniquely human competencies (Huang & Rust, 2018; Zirar et al., 2023). These include creative intelligence, originality, social intelligence, negotiation, persuasion, and complex problem-solving (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Zirar et al., 2023). The effective coexistence of workers and AI demands a blend of technical,

human, and conceptual skills (Zirar et al., 2023). Technical skills involve the ability to develop and manage AI systems, while human skills like teamwork and emotional intelligence facilitate collaboration (An et al., 2024; Zirar et al., 2023). Conceptual skills, such as critical thinking and creativity, are needed to interpret AI outputs and address complex challenges that AI cannot solve alone (Zirar et al., 2023). This necessitates continuous reskilling and upskilling for the workforce to adapt to a landscape where human and machine capabilities are increasingly intertwined (Zirar et al., 2023). Organizations must foster a culture of lifelong learning to avoid a *collective failure to adjust to skill shifts* and to harness the full potential of human-AI symbiosis (Zirar et al., 2023).

Regarding B2B sales more specifically, building on the established understanding this section examines the impact of AI on sales roles. AI is transforming the B2B sales role significantly, shifting it from a transactional function to a strategic, cross-functional process (Storbacka et al., 2009). This evolution is driven by AI's capacity to automate routine tasks, augment complex decision-making, and provide deep data-driven insights, thereby reshaping the responsibilities and value-add of human sales professionals (Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018). The integration of AI has altered every stage of the sales funnel, from prospecting to follow-up, creating a new paradigm of collaborative intelligence where humans and machines work in synergy (Paschen et al., 2020).

A primary impact of AI on the sales role has been the automation and enhancement of core sales processes (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025). AI systems are adept at analyzing vast amounts of structured and unstructured data to perform tasks like lead generation, prospect scoring, and demand estimation with greater efficiency than traditional methods (Moradi & Dass, 2022; Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018). For example, AI can analyze customer communications and social media posts to devise more persuasive interactions or predict repurchases (Davenport et al., 2020). This automation frees sales professionals from repetitive activities, such as scheduling meetings or manual data entry, allowing them to focus on higher-value contributions (Moradi & Dass, 2022; Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018). Beyond automation, AI augments the sales role by providing real-time support. AI coaches can analyze sales calls to offer data-driven feedback and training, though their effectiveness varies, with middle-ranked agents often benefiting most (Luo et al., 2021). For tasks like preparing presentations or responding to RFPs, AI can synthesize information from

multiple sources, draft talking points, and ensure consistency, significantly reducing preparation time (Dierks & Deveau, 2025).

This technological shift has precipitated a significant evolution in the sales role itself. The traditional salesperson, once a primary conduit of product information, is becoming obsolete as customers can now access this information online (Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Storbacka et al., 2009). Consequently, the role is transitioning towards that of a strategic relationship manager, consultant, or knowledge broker (Storbacka et al., 2009; Syam & Sharma, 2018). The modern sales professional is now responsible for deeply understanding customer problems, co-creating value, and marshalling internal and external resources to deliver tailored solutions (Chang, 2022; Sheth & Sharma, 2008). This requires a move from an isolated sales function to one that is deeply integrated with other departments like marketing, operations, and finance (Storbacka et al., 2009). The salesperson is increasingly acting as the caretaker of the customer relationship, overseeing not only revenue, but also the account's overall profitability and health (Storbacka et al., 2009).

This evolution has diverse implications. Sales organizations are structurally evolving from traditional product-focused models toward customer-centric and multi-functional teams that manage strategic customer relationships (Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Sheth & Sharma, 2008). This necessitates a re-evaluation of how sales teams are organized and managed (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025). For the sales professional, the focus shifts from persuasion to consultation and from order-taking to customer development, reflecting a shift to more integrated, value-driven, and consultative selling approaches across extended business processes (Chang, 2022; Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Sheth & Sharma, 2008). Human judgment, intuition, and emotional intelligence remain indispensable, particularly for interpreting AI-generated information, building trust, and navigating the nuances of complex negotiations, areas where AI currently falls short (Paschen et al., 2020). Therefore, the future of the sales role lies not in replacement by AI, but in a symbiotic partnership that leverages AI's analytical power to augment the uniquely human capabilities of building relationships and providing strategic insights (Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018).

This widespread adoption also poses a significant risk of de-skilling employees, fostering complacency and weakening their sense of professional responsibility, which can ultimately lead to the erosion of essential human expertise within an organization (Raisch & Krakowski,

2021). De-skilling is particularly noticeable among knowledge workers who use algorithmic systems without critical engagement, as they risk losing the foundational professional understanding and commercial judgment that define their status and value to the firm (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022). Building on this, a recent study suggested that relying heavily on AI chatbots could have negative effects, such as reduced neural connectivity, impaired memory formation and diminished cognitive ownership (Kosmyna et al., 2025). In the long term, organizations can become trapped in inflexible processes, unable to adapt and lacking the human skills required to change their systems (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Another implication is that this shift is reshaping the competitive landscapes by automating and commoditizing traditional business functions, thereby eroding established sources of differentiation (An et al., 2024; Chang, 2022). This trend makes it necessary for firms to shift their focus from essential human skills to novel human-machine capabilities (Krakowski et al., 2023). Firms must now cultivate competencies centered on human-AI collaboration (An et al., 2024; Vlačić et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive amount of literature highlighting the impact of AI on the sales profession, very little research specifically addresses the impact of AI on sales skills. Hunter & Perreault (2007) recognized this limitation but focused on earlier CRM and SFA technologies rather than AI. Given AI's transformative potential in B2B sales, it is crucial and timely to understand its impact on the required managerial capabilities (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025). The question of "To what extent will AI replace sales professionals?" (Moradi & Dass, 2022, p. 312) further expands this need. Recognizing this notable research gap, further research is needed to provide those essential insights.

2.3 Human capital theory

Human capital theory (HCT) conceptualizes skills as productive assets, a form of "capital" embodied in individuals, that generate economic returns (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Deming, 2022; Schultz, 1961). Empirical evidence supports this premise, demonstrating a significant relationship between human capital investments and improved individual and organizational performance (Crook et al., 2011; Hatch & Dyer, 2004). The framework explicitly accounts for the depreciation and obsolescence of human capital resulting from external shocks like technological change (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Deming & Noray, 2020). As such, HCT is a robust analytical framework for understanding how the

relevance and composition of specific skills shifts in the age of artificial intelligence (Acemoglu, 2002; Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025).

First articulated by scholars like Becker and Schultz, HCT initially focused on the micro-level, viewing education and training as personal investments to enhance an individual's productivity and lifetime earnings (Becker, 1962; Deming, 2022; Nafukho et al., 2004; Schultz, 1961). Later, the theory expanded to the macro-level, with strategic management scholars recognizing aggregated human capital as a crucial firm-level resource for sustained competitive advantage (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Campbell et al., 2012). The change expanded the idea of capital to cover non-physical aspects like intellectual and social capital (Nafukho et al., 2004). HCT has been the basis for Human Resource Development during its evolution, thus giving a clear rationale for the employment of training to enhance the performance of the organization as a whole (Nafukho et al., 2004).

HCT has traditionally served as the conceptual foundation for assessing the economic value of individuals' skills, knowledge, and abilities within the labor market (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Becker, 1962; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Schultz, 1961). Although the theory is often associated with formal education or on-the-job training, it extends well beyond educational attainment to include a broad range of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that individuals possess (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Contemporary research further highlights HCT's broader applicability, emphasizing its relevance for analyzing shifts in the composition and value of skills over time (Deming & Noray, 2020; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Schultheiss & Backes-Gellner, 2023).

The literature has extended this logic to AI and other technological disruptions, emphasizing that such innovations trigger a revaluation of existing skills: some become more valuable, some less, and new skills emerge (Acemoglu, 2002; Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Autor et al., 2003; Frey & Osborne, 2017; Schultheiss & Backes-Gellner, 2023). The process involves both a displacement effect, as automation replaces labor in certain tasks, and a reinstatement effect, where new tasks create new demands for labor (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018, 2019).

Modern studies apply HCT as an evaluative lens to skill shifts induced by AI and other technological disruptions, as the theory encompasses both gains and losses in skill value (Acemoglu, 2002; Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Schultheiss & Backes-Gellner, 2023). This focus on the alignment of skills with organizational demands makes HCT a foundational framework for classifying and interpreting the appearance

of new skills and the changing relevance of existing ones (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Autor et al., 2003; Frey & Osborne, 2017).

While it is important to understand the theoretical background and motivation behind selecting the HCT as my theoretical framework, other potential options were also considered: The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains how resources like AI drive competitive advantage at the organizational level but overlooks individual skill changes (Barney, 1991). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) focuses on users' perceptions of technology but only predicts adoption, not actual skill improvement (Davis et al., 1989). The Dynamic Capabilities framework highlights organizational adaptation to technological change but is too abstract for analyzing individual sales skills (Teece et al., 1997). The Task-Technology Fit (TTF) model assesses how well technology supports specific sales tasks, yet ignores personal perceptions and broader strategy (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). Skill-Biased Technological Change (SBTC) theory addresses skill development due to technology but assumes a directionality that limits its fit for exploratory research (Katz & Murphy, 1992).

3. METHODOLOGY

The thesis adopts a qualitative research design, as this approach aligns with the exploratory nature of the study. Unlike quantitative, hypothesis-driven methods, qualitative research allows for open-ended investigation, enabling a deeper understanding of the intricate and context-dependent character of human experience (Moriarty, 2011). By conducting open, semi-structured interviews, qualitative methods enable diverse, nuanced data that reveal individual perspectives and tacit knowledge (Fetterman, 1988; Frost et al., 2010).

One of the major advantages of qualitative research is its flexibility: the research design adapts during data collection, hence new insights and directions can emerge (Moriarty, 2011). Such flexibility is important when the emphasis is on focus shifts in response to ongoing findings. This method also places phenomena in context, unlike standardized surveys that measure variables in isolation. For example, interviews can help to explain the context behind work pressures, offering a more comprehensive understanding (Drury et al., 2011).

Finally, qualitative research is especially well-suited to examine the complex relationships, to detect hidden patterns, meanings, and emotional dynamics that influence behavior (Bergman & Coxon, 2005; Fetterman, 1988). This method provides direct access to the original data, supporting robust interpretation of the social phenomena.

3.1 Sample selection

Non-probability sampling methods, more specifically convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling, were used because they allowed practical match with qualitative research. Convenience sampling allowed fast access to the participants (Rahman, 2023), while purposive sampling guaranteed that sample participants had sales and AI relevant experience, and thus enhancing data quality (Rahman, 2023; Schreuder et al., 2001). Snowball sampling also extended the sample by using the participants' professional networks to reach additional experts (Rahman, 2023; Schreuder et al., 2001).

Participants were chosen for their expertise in sales and practical knowledge of AI. Thus, they could provide informed and relevant insights (Gerring, 2017). Although many people in senior management were selected, the aim was also to have a wide range of salespeople to provide insight into all stages of responsibility in the context of AI (Gerring, 2017; Moriarty, 2011). Furthermore, given that young people may be more native to technological changes than the more established workforce, it was important to include them (Bankins et al., 2024; Vlačić et

al., 2021). The risk of confirmation bias was managed by a rigorous analytical approach (Gerring, 2017).

A total of 472 experts were contacted, of whom 27 ultimately participated. These experts came from diverse sectors, including SaaS, fintech, energy, IT consulting and financial services, among others. Positions range from sales analysts and account executives to directors and managing partners, with 11 participants in senior or executive leadership roles. Experience levels range from 4 to 29 years, with a balanced mix of early-, mid-, and senior-career professionals. The majority are from Germany, with further representation from Austria, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland (see Appendix A for more details).

3.2 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were the preferred method due to their flexibility which allowed customizing the questions based on the participant's answers and also explore the newly emerging themes during the interview (Barriball & While, 1994; Kallio et al., 2016). This arrangement not only enabled open communication but also allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions spontaneously, thus tapping into the participants' experiences and perspectives in greater depth and more context-specific nature.

Interviews were conducted remotely using platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams to overcome geographic barriers, accommodate participant preferences, and maximize availability. Most interviews were scheduled for one hour, though some had to be 30 minutes based on participants' needs. All sessions were audio-recorded, ensuring accurate transcripts for rigorous qualitative analysis (Barriball & While, 1994).

The interview guide was slightly adjusted according to participants' roles and experience levels, allowing questions to focus on their specific work processes and responsibilities. This customization improved the relevance and depth of the data collected (Kallio et al., 2016). Confidentiality and ethical considerations were prioritized: participants' names and identifying information were removed from transcripts, participation was entirely voluntary, and research goals and procedures were clearly explained at the outset to ensure informed consent and participant comfort.

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was selected for this research because it systematically identifies, analyzes, and interprets patterns in qualitative data, making it well-suited for exploring meanings in

expert interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Its flexibility supports various data collection and interpretation methods, enabling a rich and detailed understanding of complex data.

My analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization with the data through repeated review and transcription; generating initial codes; organizing codes into potential themes; rigorously reviewing and refining these themes; developing a thematic map; and finally, defining, naming, and narratively presenting the themes with illustrative excerpts linked to research questions and literature.

To identify implicit assumptions and ideas in the experts' language, a latent coding method was implemented which aimed at the implicit meanings rather than just explicit statements (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Accordingly, this is especially effective when examining the subtle nuances in expertise and power relations as it provides the opportunity for deeper analytical and theoretical interpretations from the highly specialized sample (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

4. FINDINGS

Taking all 27 interviews into account, a total of 562 relevant statements were identified for my analysis. Due to page limitations, the most significant and representative statements were selected and are attached in the appendix for reference (see Appendix C for more details). Several key insights and themes have been identified according to the thematic analysis. To provide a clear narrative, the findings establish the sales context, then examine how skills are changing, identify the technological drivers behind these shifts, weigh the benefits and risks of AI adoption and finally outline actionable recommendations for practitioners.

4.1 A fast-paced, complex sales context

Interviewees referred to two overarching key insights. On the one hand, the dramatic increase in efficiency in the sales landscape that resulted from the introduction of new technology. On the other hand, the relevance of considering different contexts in the B2B sales process, depending on the size, culture, and type of product or service it involves.

First, it is important to understand that the **sales landscape** faces a *“completely new type of challenge in a global context with ever more efficient work processes and overall trends”* (GL), also described as an *“iPhone moment”* (BL) which is a new revolution and has driven unbelievable speed, global workflows, and productivity demands powered by AI (VT). The core of sales is still the same, but it has now become a *“dramatically new environment”* (GL) requiring *“a completely different type of requirement profile”* (GL) focusing on efficiency. For example, buyers participate more consciously, as they are already informed (AS) and the number of informal touchpoints has decreased, *“everything is done in scheduled meetings”* (GE). EM emphasizes the transition *“away from classic IT services”* (EM) to business-value optimization, whereas another interviewee points out when automation goes too far it might make sales nothing but *“pure comparability and analytics”* (UL).

The second overall insight is that **sales is not the same in every context**. Sales roles differ significantly according to the type of deal and the organizational context in the B2B sector. To give an example, a start-up SaaS is outbound and volume driven (PG) while corporate sales for complex services need a lot of strategic orchestration (EM). Another factor that shapes the sales approach is company culture. Relationship-building dominates in traditional firms, while technical argumentation plays a larger role in innovation-focused firms (TS). The importance

of people skills cannot be overemphasized throughout the selling process, yet in simple deals success “*depends 100% on people skills*” (DS) while in complex deals, they are “*only half the battle*” (DS) and are complemented by strategic deal team orchestration.

4.2 Salespeople require a comprehensive skillset

The interviews revealed a comprehensive set of 23 sales skills, organized in four groups. In essence, sales excellence is built on strong relationship skills, clear and empathetic communication, and deep commercial understanding, underpinned by strategic thinking and operational expertise. Success further relies on resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning, as well as the ability to leverage technology, foster teamwork, and deliver customer-focused, value-driven solutions in complex environments. It is important to recognize that “*every salesperson has their own style*” (TZ) and individuals combine these skills in different ways.

Relationship and communication skills

One of the most important skills, **relationship-building** was repeatedly pointed out as the base for collaboration and carrying out successful projects:

“The number one factor is, quite clearly, that people buy from people, or in other words, trust to build a genuine relationship.” (AR)

Thus, being able to establish trust was identified as a key aspect of building relationships, especially in complex enterprise level (EM, WS, GC). Additionally, the ability to engage openly and truthfully (SU), to establish a human connection, to communicate clearly and to change the tone according to the situation (MB) were key components of relationship-building.

Closely related and also one of the top skills mentioned is a strong **communication skill**. TZ described the competency as:

“You need a sense of humor, you can't be too cold, you can't be too nice, you can't talk too much or too little. Basically, you have to be very good with people [...] to be able to communicate well with your voice, with the right words, but also with your body, facial expressions, and gestures, because that's the only way to fully engage with the person [...] ” (TZ)

Additionally, conveying complicated issues in a simple and clear manner is essential, as suggested by UL: “*it's often about simplicity, so you can translate the internal language for the customer*”. Furthermore, **active listening** is critical for helping sales representatives collect unexpected information, understand customer needs, and decode hidden signals (AL, DS). To this point, an interviewee stated that “*in sales, you have to listen. What does the customer want? Because if you haven't answered this question, the sales process doesn't even begin.*” (WS)

The method is based on “*asking questions, listening, understanding the customer's perspective, and correctly sorting out their concerns*” (RK) and not just presenting the content and allowing customers to speak freely (GK, FM).

Empathy was described as “*unbeatable*” (UL) and goes beyond listening but shifting to the customer’s point of view to understand customers’ needs and avoid imposing your own ideas and agenda (UL).

Another fundamental point involves **intuitive judgment**, referred to as “*gut feeling*” (WS), which centers on: “*understanding facts at the right moments, understanding interpersonal issues and formulating actions accordingly*” (WS), that is, “*the ability to intuitively do things right, at the right time, in the right place*” (WS).

Complementary skills, such as **storytelling** for persuasive pitching (PW) and **negotiation skills** based on rigorous preparation (CZ), complete the set of relationship-centered competencies.

Commercial understanding and strategic thinking

Client understanding forms the foundation for **commercial and business case understanding**. Detailed “*detective work*” (GK) identifies how customers operate, their challenges, and buying criteria, which enables the salesperson to frame the proposal in a way that makes the client feel understood (GE, EM). Building on this, “*commercial acumen*” (BL) requires aligning the solution, price and value narrative: “*only when he [client] understands that he has a problem will he have any incentive to buy*” (GE). Therefore, it is crucial to build value-led stories clearly demonstrating ways in which the offering changes customer processes for the better (RK, GC). **Analytical thinking** is essential for this task as it allows the salesperson to “*assess whether this offer could suit the customer and think ahead*” (HE).

Profound **product or service know-how** and industry knowledge as an “*industry expert*” (RZ) provide the foundation for credibility (SU). The product must be thoroughly understood by sales professionals. They should be familiar with the latest developments in the industry, be able to communicate with the customers effectively and demonstrate sincere interest in their subjects (FM). It is essential to have a basic technical knowledge to be able to avoid “*content-free sales*” (UL), especially true for AI applications (UL, GL).

In “*complex selling*” (GE) scenarios with multiple stakeholders, **stakeholder selling** is very important. The main idea involves selling individualized value propositions to the relevant stakeholder and key buyer, therefore creating a strong business case for them (PG).

“The ability to [...] understand who they are, what is important to them, how they work in their job, how they are evaluated [...] and why the solution you are selling is actually relevant for this person.” (VT)

Strategic thinking brings these threads together in a logical way that clearly shows if a plan not only solves the customer's problem but also helps the seller (WS, TS). Similarly, **social selling** complements stakeholder selling by building trust-based relationships that lead to purchase decisions (GC).

Operational and technical execution

Interviewees also refer to effective operational and technical execution, which depends on three capability drivers. A significant factor in **organizational talent** is the ability to keep track of multi-stakeholder sales processes but also of the pipeline status, customer context, contract, financial, solution issues and acting cross-functionally to align internal experts, partner firms and clients while also coaching stakeholders if necessary (EM, RK, GE, JK, CZ): Keeping *“the bigger picture in mind and knowing what you need to close this sale [...]”* (TZ) and *“organize things properly and orchestrate them so that the right things end up with the customer”* (GE). Concluding that the salesperson is the *“connecting point for all areas and the different teams”* (HE) and *“responsible for keeping everyone together”* (HE).

At the same time, **team enablement** aims to create a feeling of *“solidarity and team spirit”* (VS), providing people with the necessary conditions that they can perform at their best even in stressful situations (VS).

Ultimately, **technology proficiency** is essential, especially considering AI applications. Sales professionals must understand available tools and underlying technologies to answer advanced client questions and prevent competitive disadvantages by not being familiar with them.

Character traits and attributes

Six distinct characteristics were highlighted during the interviews. Firstly, **resilience** is the most important quality. Being able to stay focused and especially motivated despite setbacks (TS), sustain high call volumes (FM), and withstand constant pressure to produce results requires *“very strong resilience”* (AL) and a *“high frustration threshold”* (FM). Similarly, having a **problem-solving mentality** to engage and solve problems proactively is key (MB).

Secondly, **adaptability** is essential as *“the speed at which the topics change is so high that you have to adapt very quickly”* (UL). Salespeople must react to quick topic shifts, evolving customer demands, and technological change, which demand swift perspective shifts and

integration of new practices (CZ). It is referred to as “*probably the most important skill*” (GL) for the future. Building on that, continuous **learning** and skill updating are crucial given the exponential, AI-driven changes taking place right now, even when core sales techniques remain constant (GL).

Thirdly, **resourcefulness** and the ability to think outside the box are key to delivering value and impact to clients through innovative solutions and approaches (AL).

Finally, being **ambitious** is crucial to succeed in sales, as expert TS expressed “*everyone wants to be the best, it is very competitive and if you just follow along, you won't succeed*” (TS).

4.3 AI-induced skill shift: reducing routine and elevating relationships in sales

Results show that the rise of AI in sales is shifting required skills from basic research and operational tasks toward advanced soft skills, AI literacy, and critical thinking, making relationship-building and adaptability central to success. As AI automates routine work, human-centric competencies become the key differentiator for long-term sales performance.

4.3.1 Skill shifts from the past to the present: the rise of soft skills and AI literacy

New sales skills

Sales professionals have to continue to develop their sales skills to adapt to the changing landscape. This is especially true for AI as new sales requirements for applications rise (PG, TS), as stated by one interviewee, salespeople “*have to educate ourselves and stay up to date. Perhaps the biggest challenge in sales is to stay up to date.*” (AR)

Sales experts must learn and adopt operational AI literacy, which includes knowing what AI can do, its shortcomings (especially, hallucinations) and overall, a professional, critical oversight of the output (WS). Prompting has emerged as the main new capability (HE). The crucial point is knowing “*how to communicate clearly and precisely with the AI to get high-quality answers back*” (GK). Expert PW also stated that:

“Interacting with AI is a way of learning a language [...] how to express ourselves so that the other person understands us and that is all communication and we also communicate with an AI in the same way. [...] we just have to learn how to express ourselves so that this intelligence can understand us” (PW).

Although not at an in-depth data scientist level, technical fluency is necessary to bring generative tools into work and to check the quality of results (MB, AS). Overall, continuous self-education is critical because it “*is becoming increasingly important to be able to use these*

tools. You can't avoid it anymore. In fact, it's a competitive disadvantage if you can't use them" (GE). As a result, sales professionals emphasize the need to quickly learn to handle those tools for more efficient workflows (GK, PG).

Skills which increased in relevance

Relationship skills are *"more relevant today than ever before"* (VS), as buyers *"are more informed and more mistrustful"* (AL). Salespeople must *"communicate in an empathetic and personal way"* (TS) and be carefully prepared (AL). Deep client understanding and pain-point analysis are even more relevant for deal success (RK). To this point, BL claimed that *"the deeper you understand the customer's specific problem and what you want to sell, the more successful you will be. [...] This point has become even more important."*

The need for analytical and critical thinking skills has also become more important for checking and evaluating AI-generated output (HE). On that note, it is key to point out that the underlying sales logic and reasoning still depends and is based on the salesperson him- or herself (AL). Moreover, the post-pandemic deal environment, with its overall worse economic conditions and reduced in-person communication, highlights the importance of resilience (AL). Similarly, due to the evolving demands and challenges of the sales role, the need for *"a certain kind of versatility and flexibility"* (GL) is increasing.

Skills which decreased in relevance

Interviewees highlighted a degradation of certain skills due to the support functionalities of AI. Those are *"basic skills, such as researching, summarizing, and paraphrasing"* (GE), which are described as becoming *"increasingly obsolete"* (GE). The same goes for PowerPoint design, graphical visualization (AR) and even for high analytical tasks (e.g., Excel or long-document analyses) since AI has started to become a significant supporting tool (VS). In addition, one expert added that this also applies to *"preliminary tasks, like market research, proposal preparation, client analysis"* (GC). Building on that, expert VS also argued that *"certain quality features that used to be unique to individuals will become accessible and possible for everyone"* (VS).

Considering these changes, some experts view their human capital as depreciating in value as AI becomes more valuable if they depend entirely on these applications. One participant stated that *"that's why people think [...] my skills are becoming less valuable because AI is doing the work and then AI increases in value again"* (TZ).

Shift of skills

As described above, the underlying interview data indicates that AI tools primarily support and automate administrative and operational tasks. This interaction allows employees to dedicate more time to essential, high-value activities, such as active listening and translating solutions into customer-specific value propositions. Thus, interviewees acknowledge that the integration of AI is causing a **significant shift in the skills** required for sales success (TZ, VT, AI, GC, AS, JK).

Participants also observed that *“the barriers to entry have become much lower”* (BL) by simplifying operational tasks. At the same time, this trend simultaneously increases the overall difficulty of success (AL) since excellence increasingly depends more on sophisticated soft skills (PW, AL, AS).

This shift of skills also results in a change of the **differentiation factor**, as GE stated:

“You differentiate yourself in many ways through these relationships and ultimately through understanding the customer, because products and solutions are becoming more and more comparable [...] in the end it's just a standardized price comparison. [...] The only way to counter this is to have relationships [...]” (GE)

Therefore, because AI increasingly leads to a standardization of proposals, credentials, and even prices, a sustainable competitive advantage is more dependent on relationship management (RK). To differentiate offerings, salespersons and companies must use distinguishing features such as using the specific client language, presenting cultural proximity and activating reliable networks (BL).

Unaffected skills

A significant majority of participants directly stated that AI integration has no impact on core human-centric soft skills (MB, BL, WB, RZ, RK, AR, UL). Competencies such as empathy, intuition, judgment and the ability to recognize underlying customer needs are still areas where AI falls short (UL, GC, GL). Here, AI can only support to a limited extent and not replicate or impersonate these *“person-to-person”* (GL) skills. Hence, clear communication, client-facing interactions and obtaining information from personal networks are still very important just as they were (AR, BL).

Consistent with those findings, experts emphasized that relationship-building and soft skills are the primary factor for success in B2B sales (RK, WS, RZ, PW, PG, TS, HE). Interviewees illustrated this point by claiming that *“the customer doesn't immediately buy the product [...] but rather buys you as a person”* (RZ) and *“at the end of the day, metaphorically speaking, it's*

a handshake that closes a deal” (WS). Thus, *“it's extremely important that the empathy and sympathy are genuine”* (RZ). Therefore, despite new processes and tools, sales continues to be, and will remain, *“a people business”* (RZ).

Functional enablement and skill enhancement

An additional category of findings refers to certain skills that can be enhanced by having AI act as a *multiplier* for existing expertise (VT). Here, professionals with the necessary experience are enabled to make more precise, insight-driven decisions by contextualizing information, identifying causal factors, and validating assumptions with high accuracy (ES, MB, VS).

The combination of professional sales knowledge and AI capabilities can result in substantial synergy effects (BL, AS), also referred to as *“new way of working”* (GL) and *“a whole new kind of sales”* (GL). One expert presented an example of an AI tool that calculated a complex deal and proposal creation with an accuracy within 4% of effort estimations, which would normally require several months of manual efforts and high upfront investments (BL). BL stated that *“those synergies and efficiencies are exorbitantly high”* (BL) when these tools are used correctly. Another aspect is that:

“AI encourages a different way of thinking [...] You have to think outside the box because someone else is doing it for you [...] also great for bringing in new perspectives that you might not have as an individual or as a team” (CZ)

These aspects are connected to critical and creative thinking and (MB, SU, VT). For salespeople who have skill gaps or certain weaknesses, AI can lower the barrier to learn new competencies (AS, RZ). It allows them to use the tools to compensate for weaker areas, effectively making the adaptation and scaling of key sales skills more accessible (RZ).

4.3.2 Expectations of future skill changes: the trend will become even more pronounced

Especially for a new and fast evolving technology like AI, it is essential to complement the findings of past and current experience with an outlook into future trends.

Tying back to the findings mentioned in the section above, participants emphasized that human-centric skills will continue to be and become increasingly more essential for sales success (VS, UL, RK, GC, AS, JK, WS). The core principle that *“people buy from people”* (JK) is considered immutable for the future (GL, WS, JK, EM), especially for high-value deals that require trust and relationship-building (PG). Human qualities such as empathy, the ability to make a customer feel understood and the nuances of personal interaction are seen as irreplaceable by technology (AR, RZ).

Several respondents emphasized, that the sales manager's role evolves into that of a guide and mediator (DS). Key responsibilities will include steering the team's human aspects, acting as the intermediary between the client and the internal organization and moderating to ensure customer goals are clearly translated to all stakeholders (AR, EM). One participant noted that the sales role will also increasingly shift management responsibilities towards coordinating various tools and specialized agents for multiple deals (VT).

In addition, future requirements will strongly depend on the effective integration of AI (RK). Salespeople will need a detailed understanding of client's context and how value can be added given a certain business environment (BL). This implies an "*extremely in-depth understanding of your subject*" (AL) and specialization (AL). The next step will be to leverage this knowledge by effectively handling of these AI tools (EM) with the specific business objective in mind (BL).

Interview respondents expect a far more cost-efficient sales force. Only top-performing experts who "*learn as much as they can, look behind the scenes, and understand the process from start to finish will remain*" (BL). Many operational tasks will be bundled or taken over by account managers, while also new positions will emerge as AI streamlines and eliminates traditional positions (GC). Junior staff consider this to be a threat, whereas colleagues who have been working for a period of ≥ 5 –10 years see it as gaining additional value (JK).

AI is referred to as a long-term "*colleague*" (JK) rather than just a tool (JK). Participants foresee seamless CRM-embedded agents for commercial, technical, solution, presentation, while being coordinated by a super-agent (ES, SU). This shifts the responsibility of salespeople from proactively prompting to reactive collaboration with these agents (SU).

4.4 There are four distinct stages in the sales process that can benefit from AI

The interviews identified four key stages where AI enhances the sales process: strategic planning, content generation, operational support, and performance management. Across these phases, AI accelerates workflows, personalizes engagement, and enables data-driven decision-making to optimize sales outcomes.

Strategic Planning and Client Engagement

In the initial phase, AI is an important tool in **prospecting and engagement**. It narrows the pool of new prospects according to the specific target group, identifies key contact persons, and collects client data through automated calls (PW). Such a pre-qualification process allows the

sales teams to have a better foundation for the engagement (RZ). For the **client analysis**, AI gathers data from various sources, including public and internal, and synthesizes it into an overview of the customer's context that includes their buying patterns and corporate values (ES, UL). This allows a more personalized communication strategy (TS). Besides that, AI supports in the **development of a sales strategy** by specifying and categorizing customer pain points as well as signaling possible key arguments, thus providing a more informed start for strategical planning (WS, TS).

Execution and Content Generation

During the active sales process, AI enables the **creation of content** like presentations, offers, and email templates that significantly reduce the manual effort and save time (RK, PW). **Conversation intelligence** tools can be used to record and summarize client calls, and therefore sales professionals can focus more on the client (TZ). Moreover, the transcripts resulted can also be analyzed to identify upsell potential (RZ). A core application repeatedly mentioned by the experts is AI's power to **search for internal and external information** (DS) and synthesize it into specific, tailored summaries (AR).

Operational Support and Enablement

AI provides support as a primary tool for **administrative and operational tasks**. The key aspects include organizing appointments, drafting meeting agendas, providing meeting minutes (SU, TZ) and providing **insights and explanations** to clarify complex terms or concepts (GL). Those capabilities lead to the idea of having **AI as a new coworker** (PW). PW states that the role of those applications is not to provide a final answer but rather an initial starting point, similar to a colleague who is always available.

Performance Management and Guidance

AI facilitates different methods to support the management and review process. **Portfolio management** can be achieved in a more efficient way by utilizing data-driven predictions for deals and growth potential (ES). AI is also able to provide **guidance and benchmarks** for competitors and industry standards, as well as initial figures for project efforts, which not only gives a starting point but also helps to initiate internal discussions (AS, GL). An additional application is for internal performance improvement by **review and reflection**. AI analyzes conversation data to compare the strategy of top and low-performing sales agents (RZ). This analysis identifies areas for targeted **coaching and provides recommendations** by having

digital coaches highlight risks within opportunities and suggest questions for discovery calls (BL), which are initial conversations to uncover client needs and fit.

4.5 AI in practice is a double-edged sword, increasing productivity while potentially causing skill decay

Participants agreed that AI significantly increases sales productivity by automating administrative tasks, enhancing efficiency and enabling professionals to focus on more complex work. However, overreliance on AI risks the decay of critical sales skills, uncritical dependence, diminished diligence and raises concerns about data protection and output accuracy.

4.5.1 The upside of AI integration: increasing productivity and efficiency

The findings overall present a clear picture: AI applications lead to a significant increase in productivity. This is achieved by automating repetitive administrative tasks and streamlining operational processes, such as managing CRM master data, personalizing communications (PW, VT) and overall bid management tasks (DS). Generally, improved time efficiency has been described by many experts as the most notable impact:

“It is definitely a huge leap in productivity [...] I easily save 30-45 minutes per customer” (RZ); “Saving time is a huge advantage [...]” (TS); “There are immense productivity gains in every area [...] saves you a lot of time.” (AL); “AI has brought me many positive aspects, mainly in terms of time efficiency.” (SU); “There is a clear increase in productivity [...] Used to be much more difficult and time-consuming than it is today.” (GC); “It definitely is an increase in productivity [...] it's quite clear, I definitely save half an hour of work every day.” (TZ); “I see the biggest impact in productivity, it helps me to achieve certain things faster.” (GL)

This enables professionals to manage more accounts simultaneously and spend more cognitive resources on complex tasks (GK, UL), a benefit one interviewee referred to as *“brain capacity”* (GL).

Moreover, enhanced efficiency is also related to better qualitative and quantitative work output. For instance, interviewees revealed that they employed AI to enhance and revise written materials such as emails and proposal documents (AL). Additionally, it also adds value by providing structured analysis, sales strategies and conclusions (VS). At the same time, tasks that were time-consuming before, like making lead lists, can now be done at a much faster rate, thereby increasing the overall volume of output (GC, FM).

4.5.2 The downside of AI integration: emerging risks of skill decay and cognitive dependence

Multiple risks of AI implementation were also emphasized as an additional important consideration. A primary concern is that critical background knowledge and skills will increasingly decay due to over-reliance on these AI tools (CL).

“It simply takes away the need to think logically, to dive deep into the subject, and so on. It takes away a lot of this thinking. [...] to connect the dots and do all this logical thinking.” (CL)

Accordingly, GK stated that *“if I didn't have artificial intelligence available to me today, I wouldn't be able to do my job the way I do it now”* (GK), which signals a significant dependence and is complemented by the statement:

“I haven't written a single email by hand for about two or three years. I just don't make any effort to do that anymore” (GK).

While another participant emphasized *“it is definitely a slippery slope if I have a briefing prepared without any knowledge of the subject matter”* (DS), pointing to the risk of uncritical trust without the necessary knowledge base and skills to back it up (UL, FM). This is closely related to the risk of diminishing diligence and accuracy (GC). Expert JK pointed out the possibility for hallucinations or output without any relevant client context. Lastly, handling sensitive client data is *“still extremely important and will probably become even more important in the future”* (TZ) as data protection and security concerns are an essential aspect when dealing with AI.

4.6 Critical steps toward sustainable AI integration: literacy, collaboration, and team empowerment

Finally, many interviews mentioned recommendations on the critical next steps for the future. Respondents highlighted that it is necessary for sales teams to accept a more experimental and open-minded approach to AI (VS, VT, SU, FM) which is based on fundamental prompt-engineering and IT literacy (JK). Regular sharing of best practices and role-specific training should make knowledge transfer more efficient and mitigate the problem of individual ego, where salespeople may resist change or feedback (UL, MB) or information overload from preventing the adoption of the technology (CZ). Teams must be very critical in validating AI outputs and using the collective expertise of the whole team to remain relevant to the customers (UL). In addition, it is still vitally important that juniors get hands-on experience, such as

working on real sales projects, learning what it takes to create a high-quality pitch or proposal document, and gaining client-facing exposure, which will be the base of their future skills (JK).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical and managerial contributions

5.1.1 Expanding sales skills and roles: from prompting mastery to orchestrating AI colleagues

The findings reveal a detailed, finer-grained skill framework comprising 23 distinct skills, **significantly extending classical literature** that typically categorizes skills into broad cognitive, functional, and social groups (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Peesker et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2011). While resilience, ambition, and context-dependent deal skills are not entirely new to sales in general, their explicit identification in the context of the introduction of AI is noteworthy. This framing complements existing literature (Ohiomah et al., 2020; Peesker et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2011) by enriching traditional skill maps and highlighting how these competencies take on renewed significance when sales professionals adapt to AI-driven environments.

Furthermore, the interviewees support existing literature that emphasizes prompting as an important skill in sales to avoid generating generic content (Hautamäki & Heikinheimo, 2025). However, they significantly extend the relevance of prompting and AI literacy. Interviewees described prompting as *learning a new language* and highlighted that formulating the right questions for AI mirrors the skillset of a high-level client consultant. This includes contextual understanding, empathy, and strong problem-definition abilities (Baer et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2008; Wieseke et al., 2012). A novel interpretation emerging from the data is that prompting aligns closely with consulting practices such as framing, scoping, and probing (Baer et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2008). This novel interpretation on technical competency (Doshi et al., 2025; Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019) demonstrates that prompting is an intertwined skill, requiring not only functional aptitude but also combining digital literacy and advanced interpersonal skills. Accordingly, the findings suggest a human-like interpretation and collaboration with AI, which complements the Human-AI Collaboration concept from Hillebrand et al. (2025) by extending beyond the traditional tool-like perspective to view AI as an active organizational actor engaging in mutual, adaptive interactions with human counterparts. Building on this idea, participants view AI not just as a functional tool but as a long-term *colleague*, suggesting that human-AI interactions can be richer and more nuanced.

Another novel insight is the emergence of salespeople as orchestrators of agentic AI. This conceptual notion, which is present in existing literature (Baird & Maruping, 2021; Hillebrand

et al., 2025), has shifted into a clearly articulated role in which sales professionals coordinate CRM-embedded AI agents. Managerially, these insights emphasize the necessity for firms to develop extensive AI-literacy programs, fostering both technological proficiency and critical soft skills to effectively manage and leverage the increasingly sophisticated human-AI sales ecosystem.

5.1.2 AI as augments, not replacer in B2B sales due to skill shift

One key discussion point is the significant shift in sales skills. While AI has automated administrative and analytical tasks, human-centric competencies such as relationship-building and empathy have become even more significant, as have character traits such as critical thinking and dynamic learning. Notably, commercial and client understanding have also become more prominent.

Figure 1: Shifting landscape of sales skills: **relative change** in relevance due to AI

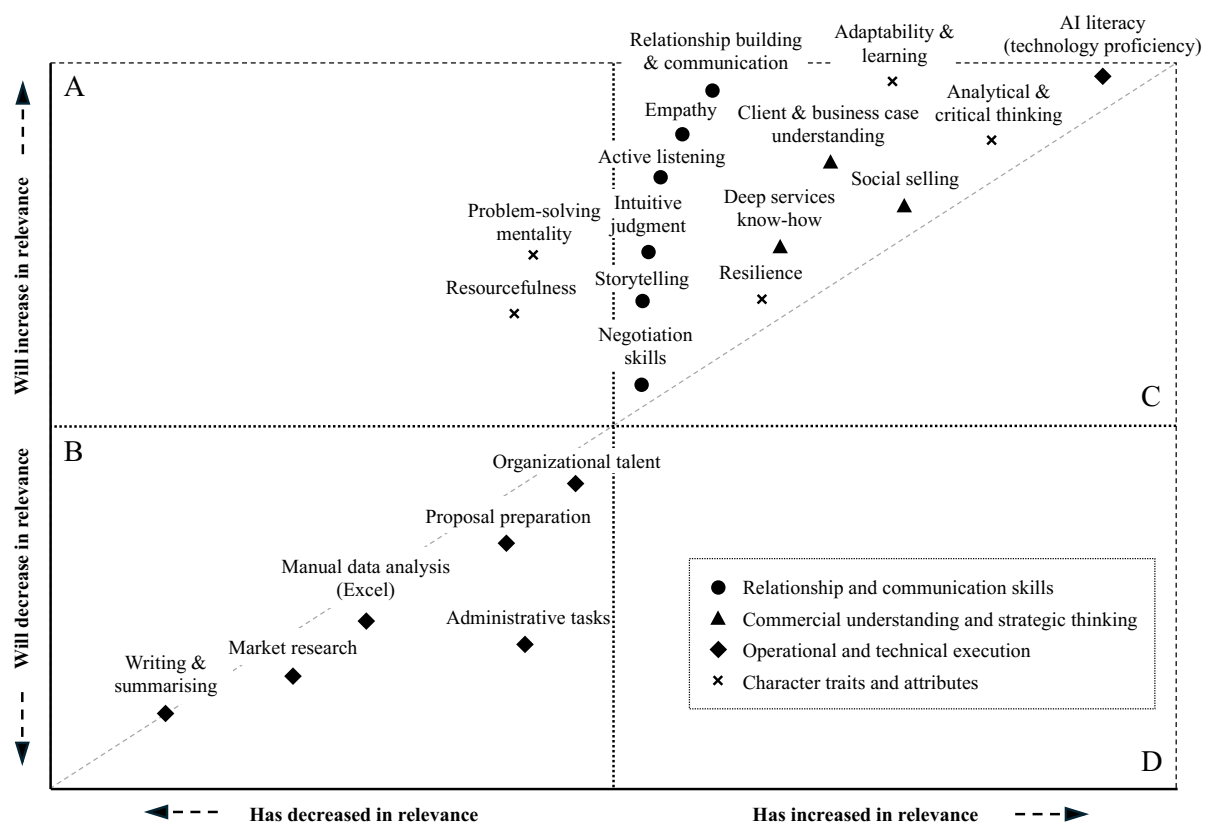


Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the AI-induced sales skill shift, mapping each skill's change in relevance based on interview findings. The horizontal axis captures shifts already observed, while the vertical axis reflects expectations for future relative movement, not its absolute importance. The exact position of each individual skill reflects an interpretation of our

interview data and is not claimed as a final, rigorous ranking; by contrast, assignment to the four quadrants is more robust. Quadrant B, at the lower left, includes skills and traits that have already declined in relevance and are expected to continue to diminish in importance. Quadrant D, at the lower right, contains skills that are still seen as relevant today but are projected to lose significance in the future. Quadrant C, located at the upper right, shows skills that are highly relevant at present and are likely to remain important moving forward. Quadrant A, at the upper left, is especially noteworthy as it captures skills that appear less relevant today but are predicted to increase in importance. The placement of these two traits is one possible interpretation that can be derived from the interviews. It suggests that salespeople have become overly comfortable relying on AI as an easy default solution for problems, small tasks, or brainstorming, which diminishes the importance of those character traits. However, targeted training, long-term human–AI collaboration practices, and cautious awareness of AI’s limits and consequences should increase the relevance of these capabilities again, contributing to consistently high-quality outcomes.

The overall shift of skills is **consistent with the literature** while also providing **novel insights**. They indicate that AI performs best in repetitive and data-intensive tasks (Moradi & Dass, 2022; Paschen et al., 2020) and still lacks the capability of emotional intelligence or providing human-like judgment with nuances (Huang & Rust, 2021; Rai et al., 2019). As a result of this shift, the study strengthens the argument that AI acts as an augments, but not as a replacer, in the B2B sales sector, thus confirming earlier research that anticipated AI to streamline the workflows while still leaving the high-touch client interactions largely untouched (Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Syam & Sharma, 2018). A key takeaway is that the findings indicate that not only is relationship-building preserved, but it has become even more important for deal success, thus **complementing the literature** in characterizing trust and personal rapport as the primary differentiators in the complex selling environments (Hartmann et al., 2018; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). The managerial implication is that resources and investments should be allocated to technology that amplifies human capabilities, makes time for salespeople to concentrate on building trust and fulfilling customer needs, instead of substituting their roles. Maintaining a *people business* model is key to ensure long-term customer loyalty, as even the advanced AI is currently not capable of replacing real human empathy or the delicate judgment that is necessary in high-stakes sales conversations.

5.1.3 AI's impact on the skill gap between salespeople

A notable insight is that AI adoption in sales can widen the skill gap between top-performing and lower-performing sales professionals. Some authors argue that AI has the potential to disproportionately boost the productivity of less-experienced or lower-skilled workers by infusing expert guidance into workflows (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025), while it is also argued that high performers benefit the least and sometimes not at all from AI augmentation (Kanazawa et al., 2025). Yet, findings show that in B2B sales, top salespeople are using AI as a multiplier for their existing expertise, deepening client analysis, orchestrating complex deals, and setting themselves apart from even the average performers. This **contradicts the literature** by suggesting that AI does not necessarily reduce performance gaps, as it was initially hypothesized, but can actually increase the differences when skilled professionals use it. The key managerial takeaway is that organizations must be aware of this effect and align their goals and organizational structure accordingly. They must implement targeted development initiatives to help underperforming staff to develop their human and analytical skills. This will enable them to participate in AI augmentation, rather than being left behind in the technology-driven sales landscape. In addition, firms could also concentrate on high performers and capitalize on their surplus output.

5.1.4 The differentiation factor of companies is evolving due to the standardization of their offerings

A key implication worth highlighting is that sustainable differentiation in B2B sales has shifted further from purely product features toward relationship-building and trust, as AI makes offers and proposals more standardized and comparable. This finding directly confirms the literature on the commoditization effect of digital technologies, which predicts that as AI automates and streamlines information, pricing, and proposal creation, traditional points of competitive advantage become less effective (An et al., 2024; Chang, 2022; Krakowski et al., 2023; Vlačić et al., 2021). The findings reinforce these points, indicating that products and solutions are increasingly perceived as becoming more and more comparable. Although the literature highlights the need for human-AI collaboration, this study complements this by concretizing the essential nature of relationship building, understanding the client, speaking their language and being present where needed as differentiation factors. The managerial implication is clear: organizations must strengthen their sales teams' relationship, consultative and contextual skills to continue to hold a unique position in the market. Instead of focusing only on product or

technical excellence, companies also need to put emphasis on genuine customer engagement and profound knowledge of customer context as sustainable sources of differentiation.

5.1.5 The ambiguous implications of AI on sales skills: augmentation versus outsourcing

A general and essential consideration that has emerged focuses on how these developments in skills and proactivity should be interpreted. The main discussion is about whether the observed productivity improvement results from enhanced human skills, as posited by HCT in this context, or if it reflects a fundamentally different mechanism.

This discussion arises from a combination of insights derived from both the existing literature and the outcomes of this study. The literature asserts a clear productivity increase due to AI integration (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Czarnitzki et al., 2023; Wilson & Daugherty, 2018; Yang, 2022), a claim which is also strongly supported by the findings. Many respondents also explicitly stated that they felt their skills had *improved* in their roles as a result of the AI implementation. Traditional HCT asserts that overall outcomes and thus productivity increase because the underlying human skills, which serve as key input factors, are developed and strengthened through training (Amankwah-Amoah & Appiah, 2025; Becker, 1962; Schultheiss & Backes-Gellner, 2023). If a person trains in math for 200 hours, he or she will likely be better at math and thus perform their accounting tasks better. Thus, the causal link underlying the productivity growth in the HCT is due to workers becoming more knowledgeable, further improving their human capacity for those skills.

By contrast, the findings in this study hint at the possibility that AI integration opens up a whole new paradigm, which **diverges from HCT**. In this *brave new world*, overall productivity increases not because individuals have improved their intrinsic skills, but because low-level cognitive tasks are simply being outsourced to more capable digital tools and agents, thus freeing up time and capacity for more value-adding tasks. On one hand, respondents felt that their overall work output increased since they had “gotten better” at data analysis and customer profiling. On the other hand, a different perspective may point to humans increasing their output not because they have improved at performing certain tasks, as they did in the past, but because they outsourced part of their workload to more capable digital hands. To think about this counterfactual hypothesis, which provides a fruitful starting point for future research, one would simply have to remove these digital tools and would likely find that the individual does not perform at a qualitatively or quantitatively higher level. In fact, recent MIT research suggests that in the meantime, with AI having taken over these tasks, workers have potentially

decreased their ability to perform these tasks since the neurophysiological basis supporting their previous skill level, just like an unused muscle, has atrophied (Kosmyrna et al., 2025). This would then indicate a significantly different way and novel interpretation of the human capital enhancement model, in which productivity is ultimately increased not due to human skills being developed, but rather bypassing or replacing them with better algorithmic capabilities. Thus, rather than genuinely enhancing the underlying human capital, the increase in individual output and productivity stems from AI taking over low-level tasks. This substitution enables humans to continue providing the expected results for those routine tasks, while at the same time generating additional output by using the freed-up time for more specialized activities, as reflected by the observed shift in skills.

This *brave new world* poses a set of important normative and managerial questions: Is the outsourcing of core skills to AI always desirable? Although overall output may increase, what are the long-term implications for skill development, the workforce, the need for human labor and our overall dependency on technology? This question highlights the need for a deeper reflection on how we conceptualize productivity gains through AI, as well as the importance of human skills, value creation and human capital in the age of intelligent systems.

A closely related discussion is the risk of overreliance, which relates to tangible risk of loss of skills. To this point, some professionals claimed to have experienced a decrease in essential abilities, such as critical thinking and communication. This finding is directly aligned with the literature, which states that the widespread adoption of automation can de-skill humans, make them complacent, and erode professional expertise (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Interviewees described this example as a *slippery slope* where reliance on AI results in fewer demands for deep thinking.

5.2 Limitations and further research

This study provides valuable insights into how sales skills evolve in the context of AI. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and highlight areas for future research. First, as a qualitative study with nonrepresentative sampling, the findings are not representative of the broader sales profession and thus not generalizable across sectors or geographic regions. Also, sales is an extensive area with major variations between simple and complex deal environments; thus, the insights presented here may not capture the nuances across all sales contexts. Finally, while the research topic is highly relevant, observed skill

changes may only represent the initial phase of a longer-term transformation, as the full impact of AI integration in sales is likely to unfold over time.

Based on the insights of findings and discussion, future research should further explore whether AI truly enhances human sales skills or primarily outsources capabilities to digital tools. Another critical question concerns the development of future sales talent: as entry-level tasks are increasingly automated, more research is needed to understand how junior staff will gain essential experience required for progression to managerial roles. Additionally, further long-term studies are needed to assess the impact of AI on company culture and organizational structure. These studies should also examine how client relationships and acceptance of AI evolve over time. Understanding the opportunities and unintended consequences of AI integration in professional sales will be enhanced by such studies.

6. CONCLUSION

The main finding of this thesis is that artificial intelligence is reshaping, not replacing, the B2B salesperson: while routine analytics and administration migrate to algorithms, sustainable competitive advantage still comes from human-centric capabilities that convert AI output into trusted, value-creating dialogue. Relationship-building, active listening and commercial understanding therefore remain, and increasingly become, the dominant predictors of success, now complemented and amplified by a new *meta-skill*: operational AI literacy, especially the ability to craft precise prompts and to evaluate machine suggestions critically.

To address the three research questions, the study combined human-capital theory with 27 semi-structured expert interviews and systematic thematic analysis, mapping 23 skills to four competence clusters and showing where AI elevates, diminishes or adds to each cluster; this approach addressed the study's objectives of identifying current core skills, mapping their AI-driven evolution, and outlining the future of the sales role.

The findings have clear implications: organizations that treat AI as a collaborator rather than a head-count substitute can free up time for high-touch tasks, but only if they simultaneously invest in soft-skill coaching and prompt-engineering training, otherwise judgment and empathy will deteriorate as routine cognition is outsourced.

In academic terms, this study fills the previously identified gap in research on the impact of AI on sales talent. It extends the human capital theory by demonstrating that productivity gains arise from the dynamic recombination of skills rather than their simple accumulation. Furthermore, it provides an initial empirical classification of the impact of AI on B2B sales competence.

Further research could explore several areas going forward. First of all, long-term studies can be conducted to observe how AI-influenced progress translates into human capital development or whether it simply results in tool dependence over time. Next, studies can examine the universality of the identified skills across different industries and cultural regions. Additionally, studies could explore how the younger generation of professionals will obtain the necessary experience as simple tasks become increasingly automated. Solving these issues will make it clearer how humans and intelligent machines can come up with value co-creation in the next era of professional selling.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview participants

#	Participant	Industry	Position	Country	Years of experience
1	PW	Transportation & Logistics	Sales Analyst	Germany	4
2	HE	Insurance	Sales Consultant	Germany	5
3	SU	Renewable Energy	Renewables Originator, Management & Sales	France	5
4	PG	Software as a Service (Fintech)	Co-Founder, Go-to-Market Lead	Netherlands	6
5	GK	Software as a Service (Logistics & Operations)	Account Executive	Austria	6
6	VT	Fintech	Country Lead Partnerships	Germany	6
7	TS	Software as a Service (Human Resources Technology)	Sales Development Representative	Spain	6
8	CZ	Automotive	Sales Enablement Specialist	Germany	7
9	TZ	Fintech	Key Account Manager	Germany	7
10	GL	Banking & Financial Services	Sales Innovation and Operation Manager	Germany	8
11	VS	Industrial Machinery	Account Manager	Germany	9
12	AS	IT Consulting	Deal Execution & Pursuit Manager	Germany	9
13	FM	Energy Sector	Head of Operations	Austria	9
14	RZ	Software as a Service (Healthcare)	Founders Associate, Growth	Switzerland	9
15	WS	Utilities	Account Executive	Germany	10
16	AL	Recruitment Industry	Account Executive, Sales Consulting	Germany	10
17	DS	Telecommunications	Senior Manager	Germany	15
18	GC	Software as a Service (Human Resources Technology)	Director Enterprise Sales	Germany	15

#	Participant	Industry	Position	Country	Years of experience
19	AR	Industrial Automation & Robotics	Senior Sales Manager	Germany	16
20	UL	Information Technology	Sales Lead Portfolio	Austria	16
21	EM	Cloud Computing and Infrastructure	Managing Director, Strategic Sales Executive	Germany	16
22	BL	IT Consulting	Sales Lead Resources	Germany	17
23	JK	Chemicals and Energy	Technology Account Lead	Germany	19
24	MB	Professional Services (Accounting)	Partner, Opportunity Lead	Germany	23
25	GE	IT and Cloud Advisory	Technology Sales Lead	Germany	26
26	ES	Software Services	Enterprise Platforms Lead - DACH	Germany	27
27	RK	Service Management	Associate Director	Germany	29

Appendix B: Sales skills based on interview findings

Category of Skill	Sales Skill	Stated by
Relationship and communication skills	Relationship building	EM, AR, SU, HE, GC, JK, WS, DS, MB
	Communication skills	PG, TS, UL, VT, HE, FM, TZ, CZ, MB
	Active listening	AL, GK, FM, RK, TZ, WS, DS, MB
	Empathy	PW, UL, VT, FM
	Intuitive judgment	WS, BL, AS
	Storytelling	PW, VT
	Negotiation skills	CZ
Commercial understanding and strategic thinking	Commercial and business case understanding	RZ, GE, AR, GK, VT, VS, RK, GC, BL, JK, DS
	Product or service know-how	RZ, PW, UL, SU, FM, RK, GL
	Client understanding	EM, GE, GK, SU, AS, BL
	Stakeholder selling	PG, GK, VT, VS
	Strategic thinking	TS, WS

Category of Skill	Sales Skill	Stated by
Operational and technical execution	Analytical thinking	HE, TZ
	Social selling	GC
	Organizational talent	EM, GE, HE, RK, AS, JK, CZ, TZ
	Technology proficiency	GC, GL
	Team enablement	VS
	Resilience	RZ, TS, AL, FM
Character traits and attributes	Adaptability	UL, CZ, GL
	Ambition	TS
	Learning	GL
	Problem-solving mentality	MB
	Resourcefulness	AL

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview protocol

#	Topic	Questions:
1	Warm-Up Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Can you describe your area of responsibility, daily and key tasks? How and where do you currently apply AI in your job?
2	Sales Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> What do you consider to be the 3 most essential skills for a person working in your sales team at the moment, and why? To what extent do you believe so-called "people skills" (e.g., relationship building, empathy, effective communication, ...) influence success in the sales profession?
3	Integration of AI into sales process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Based on your experience, does AI play an important role in the sales process, and if so, what do you consider its most important contribution? How would you assess the feasibility of integrating AI technologies into existing sales workflows? What factors do you believe could support or hinder the integration of AI in sales environments?

#	Topic	Questions:
4	Evolution of Sales Skills and potential Gaps	<p>8. In your experience, has the integration of AI into sales processes influenced the skillset you described previously?</p> <p>9. Are there specific sales skills that you believe have increased or decreased in relevance as a result of AI integration? Please specify and explain.</p> <p>10. Have any traditional sales skills become obsolete in your view? Have you or your team adopted any new skills in response to the integration of AI?</p>
5	Strategic Considerations (ROI & Feedback)	<p>11. Since the implementation of AI tools within your sales team, have you observed any measurable or perceived impacts on outcomes such as operational efficiency, conversion rates, or other key performance indicators? If so, please describe these changes.</p> <p>12. How would you describe the general feedback from your team regarding the adoption of AI in sales processes?</p> <p>13. In what areas has AI been perceived as adding value to the sales function?</p> <p>14. Are there any aspects of the sales process where your team feels that the involvement of AI may be counterproductive or less beneficial? Please elaborate.</p>
6	Human USP & Future Strategic Outlook	<p>15. What strengths or unique qualities of salespeople do you think will prevail and remain important despite the rise of AI?</p> <p>16. In your opinion, what are the most critical next steps for the sales team to take to fully realize the potential of AI?</p>

Appendix D: Thematic analysis of the interviews based on Braun & Clarke (2006) representing ~ 36% of overall citations

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
HE	My experience is that AI tools don't always work consistently with numbers, and you have to check them again.	Challenges when using	
JK	The first question is always, are you addressing an emotional or a factual level? [...] The more emotional the decision becomes, the more you have to ask yourself the question, is AI still the solution until the final step or is it perhaps just a preparatory element that I then really have to adapt. [...] if I now translate a user story of an end user into a technical design, then an AI can already deliver a relatively high level of output, even in a template structure. But if I have emotionally complex scenarios or a complex product that I am selling, I will always have to stand up and make sure that it fits exactly to the customer's environment and stakeholders.	Considerations for AI implementation	
AL	Many people are overwhelmed, to be honest. I'm in a very tech-savvy environment, so I'm surrounded by software and AI in general. The perspective is naturally quite different there, and it's seen more as an opportunity. [...] For open-minded people who want to approach things, it's a great opportunity. But I believe that people who are not open to AI will find it very difficult to accept.	Implementation and perception are depending on company specific details	
AR	It's also certainly a matter of trust, in the end, to rely on the capabilities of AI. [...] But it also requires a change in thinking since, of course, I could do it myself. Delegating this task to the AI is an aspect that will probably require some rethinking in the future.		Adoption Readiness of AI
TZ	[...] the AI output depends on how you prompt it and how you deal with it. And if you don't use it at all, you won't get good at it, of course. Then you'll always get crappy results and generally be dissatisfied with AI and say that everything used to be better and not use it. But if you actively approach the whole thing[...] how do I prompt correctly, or five tips and tricks for prompting for dummies, so to speak, then you can handle it much better and then, of course, you'll get much better results, which will make you say, how cool, now I'll work with it even more because I know how to use it. I think that's super important.	Implementation is use-case and value driven	
PW	[...] a kind of catalog thinking, meaning if it's not quite as complex and then it's also quite straightforward to use, because you can easily provide your AI with the information you need. But as soon as you get out of this kind of catalog thinking, you also have to know as a professional how to approach your objective and how to prompt correctly. it's important to learn how to deal with AI so that the result is what you want it to be. i think that's the biggest challenge, not only to integrate it into the AI, but also to make it usable in such a way that the result is what you imagined beforehand, what you want to get out of it [...]	Needs Clarity on Use-Cases and Training on usage	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
SU	When I use AI for quantitative tasks, like figures, it's easier than when I use it for qualitative tasks. [...] when I use AI for calculations in Excel or data computations, I get results quickly. When I need specific qualitative insights, such as market or regulatory insights, or references to new EU regulations, I need to train the AI a bit more.	Output quality is based data	
WS	AI is generally perceived very positively [...] so it's not just hype about AI, but that it's actually being used in sales management	Perception of AI topic	
TS	Generally, the knowledge and application of AI are very advanced. ... The company itself is also very young. The IT structures are also extremely young and very dynamic. In my team, for example, nobody is older than 30. AI is just a well-established topic here. AI is definitely a very big part of our work. It's also a very big part of our daily lives.	Ready-to-use applicability	
GL	[...] the field of sales will probably take a while to realize the development and applications, especially compared to other areas. [...] I think in the sales process you will also have to find one or two topics where you can really get involved.	Receptivity for Change	
AR	A decision should never be made solely based on the given values or AI tools. I think there's a big danger that if we rely too much on the tools, we'll make the wrong decisions. These decisions may not fit the specific client context or the industry in which we operate in sales. This is something that must be considered very carefully.		
GC	I think that with AI you run the risk of not working as accurately as you used to. [...] for example, when it comes to spelling [...] I assume that what I've been given somewhere is correct and I trust it somewhere [...] that's the biggest danger I see, that you use it, it works well once, it works well twice, it works well three times, then at some point I assume that it will always be right because it's a process that creeps in somewhere. And somewhere along the line I trust that this is the case.	Risks of AI Implementation	
JK	I have used AI to summarize and consolidate the large amount of documents that a customer usually has. This works from a technical standpoint, but the AI interprets the text in the same way that I, or anyone else, would when reading a text. The risk of summarizing these 30, 40, or 50 pages of RFP into three pages of AI summary, and only reading the summary, is high in complex scenarios and deals, as we might not read everything the customer really wants. [...] I've seen two cases where the AI had hallucinations and the summary actually contained something completely different from what the customer wanted.		
TS	There are actually specific AI or KI workshops. We are supposed to educate ourselves, build assistants to help us and work with them. Last month, we also had AI Week, where these workshops were offered again. During AI Week, there are also competitions where assistants are built to make our working lives easier, and the best one wins.	Training techniques	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
FM	AI is currently being used in customer support, mainly to categorize customer enquiries. This categorization makes it easier to process the enquiries. We're currently at around 50 percent.	Administrative and operational tasks	
MB	AI can help with the entire generative process, for example, in communication, whether written or, in the near future, even verbally. In other words, in the transactional part, such as CRM system maintenance, analysis, and so on, there are many things where AI can help you.		
SU	I also use AI more and more now, especially for market insights related to sales. For example, when I have to prospect for new clients or find information on specific clients or sectors, it's quite efficient. I use AI a lot now because I've had really good results with it. For example, I wanted specific information on energy needs in the data center and steel industries, and it was quite useful.		
TS	Yes, so in our case, there are specific pain points that are highlighted by AI. That is, if there is no automation or digitization in the company, those are pain points. Sure, we can't use AI to find out if they're still using Excel spreadsheets or if they've automated it. But what we can find out is if a position has been vacant for months and is still listed on the website, or if advertising is still done manually, like sending emails, and so on. We identify all of that with AI.	Client analysis	Areas of Impact within the Sales Process
UL	I believe the most important point is analyzing the customer's current situation. Basically, I can now get a much quicker overview of the client context on certain topics from public sources. I don't always find everything I need, because sometimes it's just some internet programmes that you can't find any information about, but I can put together a customer context much faster than I could before, when I would need to do a lot of research.		
UL	The same goes for the Power Map, for the stakeholders on the customer side, where I can quickly perform an analysis and request background information on specific people or situations, projects. The Customer is planning a carve-out or something else. I can easily get information on that.		
BL	As part of the approval process, I am provided with a digital coach who pre-sorts the questions to a certain extent and creates connections, indicating watchpoint where the highest risk of losing the opportunity lies.	Coaching & recommendation	
AR	However, using Gen-AI to optimize customer content and emails is certainly a factor that plays a role here.	Content Creation	
PW	What's also exciting is conversation intelligence, where you can have phone calls analyzed to see how the customer reacted, for example, and I think AI can now also help to analyze empathy or other soft skills. It won't take yours away, but it can help you to perhaps understand your counterpart better.	Conversation intelligence & analysis	
RZ	[...]this tool, which records our customer conversations, has been transferred from Sales to Customer Success, so that Customer Success, because Customer Success is also responsible for		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	upselling, can use the transcripts and analyses to identify candidates who might be more suitable than others for a particular upsell of a particular product or service.		
RZ	The most important impact of AI in the sales process is when we talk to customers, like when we're actually selling the product[...] it just helps us end up with a really good summary, and of course, it's also linked to the performance analysis of different sales agents.		
MB	[...] in the sales strategy context, I see a lot of value. If you maintain a system with different complexities, such as service group, price, margin, and delivery setup, the system provides you with many things that we can work with. Of course, a trained AI or Gen-AI system can handle much of the interpretation.		
UL	[...] just had an example of a sales strategy where we had to structure and write down different aspects of a sales strategy. We then realized that it could also be done in our CRM system with the click of a button using AI. There were some extremely good aspects that came out of it. Of course, you have to provide the machine with the right input first, but you will definitely get relevant output.	Development of a sales strategy	
WS	For example, if I want to develop a sales strategy and use a tool to identify the customer's situation [...] give me a suggestion, what are the three top arguments how I can convince the customer to select me and not my competitor [...] these are no-brainers but help for initial orientation [...] also quite good for strategic things		
JK	[...] where it has an impact, which is certainly positive, is when we dive into data analysis topics. Are the solutions right? What is the pricing environment that we see? For example, what are prices that work in such a market environment?	Guidance and benchmarks	
GL	Point two is, for me, primarily about understanding[...] as a small example, an definition of terms or cases where I don't understand certain terms[...] explain to me why cash flow is relevant in this field[...] In other words, show me an example of how I can further increase relevance or efficiency.	Insights and explanation	
PW	Nowadays, AI is also more about inspiration, how could I do something, but at the end of the day I can still decide what I want to do and I think that's where we are today.	Inspiration for ideas	
ES	Deal management, for example, has become much easier. Thanks to the integrated AI agents, decisions can be made much more quickly. What does that mean for my portfolio? I can tell which part of the portfolio is growing or what the best profit opportunity is. What kind of services I should approach [...] it's not just about automated data, but making decisions based on that data is made much easier with AI	Portfolio management	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
PW	[...] actually in lead generation [...] This is the first impact of AI that you already get somehow in sales [...] you can let it filter out which companies are currently interested in specific things, ask a short question, you can filter the contact persons super quickly and you can also find out super quickly what buying interest there might be, what content the person is currently interested in and AI helps you enormously to adapt the content for this person.	Prospecting & Engagement	
RZ	In the sales process, we use AI in outreach and directly in customer meetings[...] for outreach, we use a tool that makes cold calls via AI, meaning they make the calls[...] ask 1-2 questions, and these questions are fed back into our system, which actually helps the sales team to make qualified cold outreach calls because some information has already been gathered.		
PG	Then there's the second area, which I would call analytics. For example, it records and transcribes everything, as well as incorporating AI to highlight certain points. [...] Some versions of these note takers are also able to offer targeted coaching based on specific sales frameworks.		
RZ	Depending on what is being said, we can also assess how promising this customer is[...] and in this context, our Head of Sales can also use this tool to make comparisons[...] this sales agent has a conversion rate of 70%, this sales agent has a conversion rate of 30%, and can then analyze: compare all the words used by the top performers with what the low performers said, for example[...] in order to increase the conversion rate.	Review & reflection	
RZ	[...] as a good performer, I can learn even more about myself [...] because it gives me a whole new perspective on my abilities to reflect on myself, thanks to these new data points [...] this creates even more awareness among individual sales agents [...] But overall, I believe that the learning outcomes that can be gained from this, which then influence skills, have become hugely significant.		
WS	another important role in the sales process [...] knowledge management in the sense of i need this and that information from my company, please search for it, find it, spit it out to me and, in the best case, also already within the structure of the customer's request.	Search for internal and external information	
DS	There are also questions regarding information consolidation in existing sales projects or sales initiatives, such as the question of summarizing or extracting certain information from customer documents, such as tender documents and also, I would call it, the derivation of possible actions from these customer documents or even from several customer documents.	Summarize and synthesize information	
GE	... but I use AI to structure things, analyze and summarize customer documents, although I must say that I prefer to read the client wording myself.		
RZ	I would say that the skills are still just as important, which means that, in my opinion, their significance has remained the same, but the adaptability and learning ability of sales agents who may not have had these skills before is now easier to acquire compared to the past[...]	Ability to learn new skills is enhanced	Functional Enablement

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
ES	[...] it allows for more brainpower in the sales process, to approach deals more precisely, with prepared figures, data, facts, the comparison with industries and also what the development, trends, customer buying behavior [...] also depending on the sourcing strategy of the customer, I can also align my offer to it	Enables better insight-driven decision-making	and Skill Enhancement
CZ	I think AI encourages a different way of thinking because it's not your own way of thinking. You have to think outside the box because someone else is doing it for you. This is also great for bringing in new perspectives that you might not have as an individual or as a team.	Enables outside the box thinking	
BL	In my experience, the typical sales skills have not yet changed much, but the typical sales person currently uses all the AI tools if he is smart, in order to become faster in his old way of working and achieve synergy effects ...		
BL	It's frightening how closely AI Tools' estimate aligns with expert opinion. For example, an estimate for a deal worth over 100 million was calculated with an accuracy of 4%. This process took several months, involved over 100 customer workshops, and incurred about 1 million in personnel costs. [...] Someone with the right skills and an old-school, end-to-end approach who uses the AI tools can derive synergies and efficiencies. Those synergies and efficiencies are exorbitantly high.		
GK	There are various sales experts, for example, and I like to upload a PDF of them or their latest LinkedIn posts to create a digital twin of this person which is not perfect, but sufficient. Then I ask what this person would do next according to the PDF or their expertise, and I work through the whole sales cycle with them. In my work, it is very important to be precise and, most importantly, to ask the important questions in each sales cycle or area, depending on which phase we are in.	Enables synergy effects	
GL	That's why I would say that the sales person from back then can use the new skills you are now acquiring or have at your disposal to redesign or reorganize your workflow. I'm not calling it a digital sales person, that might be too much, but if you learn the tools, if you're willing to adapt to certain roles, then I think there's a whole new kind of sales, a whole new role of sales that's available.		
TZ	But those tools can support you so much and make you appear faster and smarter if you use it to its full technical potential and build it into your workflow, which is what more and more people are doing at the end of the day. In that sense, your skills are actually enhanced by AI if you use it correctly.	Enables to be more time efficient	
UL	[...] your skills will be emphasized even more. Actually, I think that in many areas, it will lead to the need for much more specialized specialists. This means that if today your strength is communication and you spend 20, 30 or 40% of your time on trivial things, and this falls away in	Enables to concentrate on essential tasks	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	the future, your strength will naturally be focused on the communication that is really relevant. [...] I would agree that the use of AI will lead to a greater need for specialized skills in the future.		
WS	in the topic relationship [...] you always have the possibility to use AI tools as analysis tools [...] example, you have a social style of a counterpart and want to analyze it ...	Enhances ability to analyze social aspects	
CZ	It is much easier to prepare for negotiations by allowing yourself to be challenged by AI at one point. This allows you to build up argumentation structures and consider how your counterpart might not like it and how you can argue against it. You simply play through the situation.	Enhances reflection ability	
SU	Currently, I need to be proactive with AI. I believe in the future it will be automatically integrated into our tools and sales tools, like the different CRMs we use. Whenever I enter new commercial queries, I will receive requests from the AI directly, without me having to proactively ask for specific information, such as suggestions on how to increase sales volume. I would then be more reactive to the AI than I am now, when I have to be proactive.	AI as a new coworker	
BL	I believe that high performers who learn as much as they can, look behind the scenes, and understand the process from start to finish will remain. However, there will be fewer of them. [...] The crucial point is to understand what you want to achieve so you can use the tools accordingly.	Clear understanding of goals and skills will prevail	
EM	I believe AI will allow us to explore areas that have not yet been fully developed. Because everyone will eventually be able to make any IT operation based on GenAI much cheaper than it is today. There will be no differentiation. But I believe you will be able to differentiate yourself based on how well you understand your customers' businesses, allowing you to use generative AI to make the entire process or operation more cost-effective beyond just IT.	Future success depends on integration of AI	Future of Sales Manger
AL	As long as AI is not more emotional than a human, you will still need a sales manager. I believe that everything you can technically outsource will eventually be outsourced. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that the more technical everything becomes, the more important the human component becomes, because the customers want to see that you're making an effort. It's a sign of appreciation.		
AR	In my view, the customer must feel two things. Firstly, he must feel understood. He must feel understood in his concerns and challenges. Secondly, we must be able to respond to the challenges that the client brings to the table. In other words, we must be able to demonstrate the benefits he will receive by using our solution.	Human qualities and nuances will prevail	
ES	[...] what AI cannot take away as skills is, for example, the people skills, which means that a customer does not buy systems from systems, but rather buys from people with a sense of trust. Also, in the event that something goes wrong, I have a person I can turn to who will take responsibility for the problem. These nuances will not go away. [...] Sales is more than just facts		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	and figures, understanding what impact my idea has on people and assessing this correctly and then communicating it properly [...] a machine would fail here. You need this emotional element in a sales process		
RZ	When we really break it down, it's empathy and sympathy. [...] It's about that human touch, making a joke during a sales pitch, having that creative touch you need to come up with something funny or humorous on the spot, which plays to your strengths as a person, because it all comes back to the fact that I'm selling myself as a person first and then the product. I think that's very hard to replace.		
SU	I mean, I need to be creative and find a new project that will fulfill the demands of the evolving market, new regulations, and the fact that the products I sell are tailor-made. I think this requires a combination of human thinking and understanding with the support of AI, as well as soft skills that are closely linked to human skills.		
SU	In general, I think a critical mindset about people will remain. When negotiating specific deals, it's crucial to maintain this mindset in order to improve the outcome, align with the client's perspective, and learn how to respond to client requests. This is something that is really linked to human sales.		
TZ	Yes, the more advanced the technology becomes, the more obsolete humans with their many facets will become, even in sales. But that will take a while, because humans have souls and AI doesn't[...] you have this human quality, but maybe that will be replaced at some point too[...]		
UL	Absolutely, the emotional factor is crucial in both the proposal document and, as mentioned, in the interaction, for example, in an offer presentation. But, of course, there is a certain element of emotion in the proposals, in the language, and in the way we present things. I would argue that we can better evaluate this than an AI because we have contextual knowledge, such as having recently spoken with the customer or other information. Sometimes, it's the little things, like the customer not using a certain word or mentioning a specific context, that you can't easily incorporate into a purely analytical, comparative process.		
VS	I believe that the sales manager will still be around because there is always a human element to the job. I think that's the difference, particularly in sales.		
VT	I believe that's the same principle nowadays, but trust will play a huge role. [...] this people's knowledge, this empathy plays a big role.		
AL	This means that the more operational you work, the more important it is to have an extremely in-depth understanding of your subject. I can imagine that the differences in specialization areas will become more pronounced and that the level of expertise will become extremely high [...]	In-depth understanding of subject will be required	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
DS	You will still have a situation where you have various experts sitting around the table, discussing things together and working out a solution. In my view, that's not going to go away, and then there's the interpersonal aspect of "I've talked to the customer" and "I understand the customer's goals"[...] have i managed to convey these customer goals to my team so that everyone is really on the same page and we can then work together in a structured process to find a solution[...] In my view, these are many, many small and large building blocks that are really just about interpersonal relationships and understanding, moderating, mediating, and the like.	Manager as guide and mediator	
BL	Generally speaking, traditional skills are still relevant today, but it will be exciting to see whether this will decrease or increase with the current development, and this will be exciting from two different perspectives: My experience from Corona [...] that you still benefit a lot from existing relationships and can also make sales activities much easier from them, meaning that the existing business with an existing relationship continues to flourish significantly vs. having genuinely new business [...] But now that Corona is a bit further away and due to macroeconomic influences, the world is changing to some extent again. And now the big question is to what extent this topic is still changing as you can now prepare for new relationships in a completely different way. [...] the skill of playing the game will not change, but there will be fewer and fewer people who can really utilize and develop this and really apply these skills.		
GC	AI will lead to some sales positions simply being eliminated or these tasks being bundled somewhere by the respective account manager. There will be new sales positions, designations, roles that don't even exist today because this combination of activities will simply be bundled together in one place.	Sales force reduction	
GC	The question is who you call a sales manager [...] I think that the entire sales organization based on orga positions, in other words the support work for the actual salesperson [...] that these positions are not necessarily eliminated, but are bundled into a central position. [...] In other words, you will no longer need 60-70% of the sales workforce in the future.		
JK	For example, junior colleagues tend to say, "But if AI does what I do every day, what will my job be?" "Will I be unemployed in six or twelve months because AI will do what I do every day?" In other words, the evaluation of AI or Gen-AI is seen as a threat. [...] Five to ten years of professional experience, or maybe even more, and these colleagues clearly see it as an added value.		
AL	A very strong trend right now is social selling, which is actually at the core of what you do. You're a person, and I trust you. What you give me makes sense and has helped me. That's why I think you're great and want to buy from you. Social Selling is the essence of a counter-movement	Sales is a people business; people buy	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	to "it's all AI-based and everything is the same". But those who use social selling also use AI all the time. There's a very strong symbiosis between the two.	from people, this will not change	
GC	In my opinion, there will only be account managers, who really manage the customer, which means presenting the offer, responding to the personal interests of the contact person, this consultative selling also with the help of AI, of course. But ultimately communicating all of this to the customer in a certain way. These would be the core tasks of a salesperson. [...] I think the only thing that will be left will be face-to-face contact from the salesperson.		
GL	Why I think the sales manager will remain, to give you the reason why I say a very clear yes. Because in my view, sales is only ever done from person to person. [...] Of course with a different skillset, of course with different tools, of course with different learnings, of course as a more versatile person [...] but the fundamental principle of sales will still be the same.		
TS	[...] it's simply impossible for a computer to form a human connection. Building up this level of trust and communication is important, and ultimately, I don't think any company, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, would sign up for software without speaking to someone first. [...] It is important to know that there are people behind the software who you can call and ask questions, rather than just knowing that there is an AI.		
UL	I believe it will heavily depend on the product you're selling. Our business model is based on people, we're a people business. The only product we sell is capacity, or in other words person-days. [...] Every offer we make is based on the fact that we have a pyramid, a project team, an operations team, or whatever. [...] The client wants to know who he's dealing with, and AI can't solve that. In my opinion, the key to most processes is always interaction, not necessarily the offer you create. [...] because the client wants to see what they're buying, feel it, and experience it. In the end, the client buys people, as if they had an extended team. As long as that's the case, you won't be able to do without a human component in the process.		
VT	But I believe that in the next few years, we will see that the sales manager always has an external effect and is the person who communicates, builds relationships, and sells. [...] for large sales cycles, products, and purchase prices, AI will actually take place in the background.		
MB	The sales manager of tomorrow must prepare for greater volume of deals because, at the same time, we are trying to qualify more strictly to increase our win rate. This means that we must select the opportunities we pursue very carefully. I believe that in the future, there will be a field of opportunities that the system indicates as a good fit, suggesting that there is a lead, for example. And then, to a large extent, it will be processed and followed up by AI. This means higher throughput, a higher number of opportunities, but also no reduction in the win rate, but rather an increased win rate, primarily due to AI.	Shift of tasks	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
VT	The sales manager will increasingly take on the role of a project manager, coordinating various projects. [...] it's possible that you'll have agents supporting you in specific areas of your sales process, as well as tools to help you manage the entire process. [...] coordinating these agents and tools is what will remain, I believe, that would be my assessment.	Strong emphasis on project lead and management.	
CZ	When it comes to topics such as pipeline maintenance, for example, it helps to have an overview. This can be done by evaluating reports to see if you are on the right track.	Administrative and organizational tasks require less effort	
AL	I would say that critical thinking has become even more important. Because the tools still make mistakes. So, if you can't get the sales causality chain right on your own, then AI won't help you either. In my view, AI can help you to recognize such things and create a data base very effectively. But if you can't empathize with someone and draw conclusions yourself, I think it's very difficult. Because what would you do in the conversation if you were on a call with someone and you didn't know why it was relevant?	Analytical and critical thinking even more important	
AR	... in the context of using commercial parameters or existing data to make them useful for our customer projects. In my view, these are things that still require a lot of human input, such as the ability to evaluate, which is not yet available in AI in this level of detail that is required on this level.		
AR	Overall, the applicability is good. In the sense that they provide a solid framework with which we can cover basic activities. However, there is also a limitation, which is why it is only fundamentally good. I think we can develop material with it quite well, but I also believe that our value contribution as sales person comes from the specific selection of content and the actual refinement of the content for the client and the benefit that the specific client will have and i think this emphasizes it even more.		Impact on Sales Skills
AR	In my view, the fine-tuning will always be left to the human, the team member, to bring in that final client touch. And, of course, when it comes to presenting complex content precisely and clearly, it is also up to the salesperson to provide a comprehensive overview.	Client understanding and pain assessment more relevant	
BL	I think establishing a close relationship with your clients and understanding their problems is more important than ever, and then continuing to find answers internally with your network, including GenAI tools. This human element is key to understanding your customer, building trust, and so on. The deeper you understand the customer's specific problem and what you want to sell, the more successful you will be. [...] That's why I think it's important to always think in terms of the customer and their problems and then consider how to approach them. This point has become even more important.		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
PG	It will probably always be people's job to ask questions during sales meetings, discovery sessions or demos, because although AI can ask in-depth questions, it wouldn't be so good at conveying exactly what is needed to build a business case.		
RK	In my opinion, the human-to-human dialogue has decreased because we like to focus on ourselves. Reflecting on where we stand, what we need to do differently, and how things work is important, but discussions are often internally focused. I need to really put myself in the position of the customer again and prioritize that. I also need to rigorously delegate, push aside, or let a KI do it if possible, to give this dialogue more room. This will not be possible to ignore. It has to increase again.		
AS	[...] certain things will be eliminated by AI tools as they develop. However, this does not mean that a specific activity is no longer needed. I believe it will mainly be a shift in responsibilities. [...] In my world, AI tools are naturally simplify certain areas that are currently performed by those who are just starting out. But that creates a greater focus on other skills, allowing colleagues who are starting out to have much more time to concentrate on other core topics. [...] In my view, it creates a good opportunity for certain core topics, allowing colleagues to work on things that they would only start working on after one or two years		
BL	The barriers to entry have become much lower. [...] you can find out things relatively quickly. I could approach you with a personalized approach and set up a relatively good profile about you. With this information, more people could approach you and sell you something fairly personalized. This is why I believe there is a clear increase in the number of people who can approach you with a better level of knowledge than before. However, I don't believe many people can really use this information because they lack the fundamental sales skills. You can tell when someone has a strong sales background.	Focus shift to soft skills and people skills	
DS	In terms of people skills, they have actually become even more important, because now and in the future, we will be structuring complex issues or providing briefings on macroeconomic factors affecting your client's industry[...] more and more of this will be taken over by AI. This means that the professional hierarchy will become flatter.		
GC	In sales, the change is still very small compared to other areas. Nevertheless, there are skills that have become significantly less relevant based on their proficiency level. [...] Everything that is systemic, so to speak, such as old applications like Excel, PPT, Research, where I needed a certain amount of knowledge somewhere, these skills have all become less important. [...] All new systems, all AI systems have become all the more important, because I have to deal with AI and I also have to know how to train this AI. [...] Everything that is personal through empathy, a personal structure, certain presentation skills, language skills in direct contact, how do I express		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	myself to the other person? How should I act? These are simply skills, negotiation skills, where an AI won't help me.		
AL	It's becoming more difficult to close a deal. This naturally means that you have to be robust. These gold-plating times before the pandemic are definitely not here yet, at least not currently. So I would say that this is becoming more important.	Increase need for resilience	
VT	I believe something that is very important is data-driven thinking, which can be backed up. This is already happening and will certainly become more important, as it's not just about having a qualification or education, but rather about being able to evaluate based on whatever data is available, to determine whether it's worth investing time and energy in.	More data driven decision making	
GL	[...] but because of the new requirement itself, the sales role will again challenge you more with a certain kind of versatility and flexibility.	More versatility and flexibility required	
GC	It's product-specific and it also depends a bit on the revenue, how important relationship skills are [...] If you go into the higher and larger segments, especially when it comes to staffing issues, the topic of data protection, if it goes into that, you definitely need a relationship with the customer, a certain empathy behind it, in order to understand the customer and to inspire trust somewhere. [...] this personal component, especially in enterprise business and key account management, will always be there.		
GE	The skills will focus on the topics that you cannot address using AI. In other words, I would say it's a healthy sense of judgement, client-facing topics and a certain kind of experience that you can't quantify.		
GL	[...] points such as relationships, communication, understanding the customer, understanding people, showing empathy. Yes, these are things that have of course always proved their worth somewhere in the sales process. [...] In my view, these are things that will not change in the age of AI. [...] Because I am firmly convinced that you will have new processes, new tools and different requirements, but sales itself will always remain person-to-person for me. [...] these cognitive skills that you also need for interpersonal trust and to create interpersonal trust. For me, these are things that are simply not yet available in AI or are not yet ready.	No effect on human-centric soft skills	
JK	People skills and issues will continue to be relevant. In my view, they will become even more relevant with AI than they are today. If you think about the fact that, in the long term, we will be using AI in some form of human-machine interaction with people, working with agents, the question becomes what characterizes you as a person and what added value you bring to the table as a human. These are the very things that matter. Even in the long term, AI will not be able to do this for you.		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
PW	A lot of modern and hard skills can be replaced by AI these days, but when it comes to soft skills, there is still an area where you need to be curious: why am I in sales and why do I want to sell something and how can I go about it? These are topics where AI is already doing well, because it can of course also analyze people or everything we are interested in. But this step, where do I buy now, is still mostly people business. At the end of the day, a person sits in front of a person [...] this empathy [...] having a face that I can call, we might not yet be able to replace that.		
SU	Yes, I think so because, once you start working with people, these traditional sales skills, like relationship, communications and so on will always be involved. I would definitely say so.		
TS	I think what remains essential is clear communication, as well as what I meant by empathy and building relationships. In my opinion, this is definitely a human thing that AI cannot simply replace, because no AI can build such a personal level of trust.		
TZ	At the end of the day, relationship skills are just as important as they were before, so having these skills is a key part of sales. Personally, I see AI as a tool, and honestly, it's clear that it'll never be able to fully replace a salesperson, especially when it comes to big clients. [...]		
UL	I absolutely agree that points like communication and relationship are equally important. [...] partly because the customer is still not fully on board with AI. Long story short, I see it as being the same as it was five, eight, or ten years ago. Only the channels have changed slightly. Digital platforms have naturally become much more important, but yes [...]		
UL	Empathy is a good example of this. You have to be able to recognize what the customer is not telling you. The things that the customer doesn't say can't be included in the document by the AI on the customer side either. I think there are topics like empathy that the AI can't replicate.		
WS	I think intuition is the only thing that cannot be replaced by anything else. It's a human gut feeling. I think you always need that in sales and an Ai tool will never be able to support you properly. I think that's one thing in the sales profile that's inherent, either you can do it or you can't and there won't be any technical support.		
WS	[...] it is important to remember that AI does not replace these sales skills, but supports them. These soft skills, this personal connect, Ai does not replace that and AI will not replace that in the near future either[...] That's why I believe this is crucial for every sales job, whether it's B2B in B2C or across industries, it's a people business, you always need these traditional soft skills. Without them, you won't be able to achieve much in sales. [...] these skills will always be needed, which means they won't be replaced by AI.	No substitution of personal or soft skills	
GC	[...] less important for the topic research of various information, i.e. preparation for cold calls. Super important as a BDR, especially in the sales process or as an account executive [...] To find out , how do I approach the customer with the right contact person? What does the customer	Obsolete or declining skills	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	actually do? How much turnover does he generate and what is his economic situation? I can now summarize this information within a few seconds.		
TZ	[...] I think you can see it both ways, because there are also many people who put all their trust in AI and think it will do everything for them [...] So yes, in part, that's why people think, okay, my skills are becoming less valuable because AI is doing the work and then AI increases in value again.		
VS	Take the example of someone who had very good analytical skills to understand complex situations. I can see that nowadays, such skills are simply taken for granted because people have a different set of tools. [...] Take Excel analyses, long document analyses and so on. [...] this has already started and on top of that, we can see a change in the sense that certain quality features that used to be unique to individuals will become accessible and possible for everyone.		
AL	I even have the feeling that relationship skills are more relevant today than ever before. The classic sales trainers I met in the '80s and '90s had a very hard way of selling. They were all about getting the deal done quickly, taking people by surprise, convince people [...] That doesn't work anymore. People are more informed and more mistrustful, so it's not possible to do things the way they used to be done. I believe that it is more important than ever to be empathetic and to prepare very well.		
TS	Nevertheless, I would say that in order to build trust and establish a relationship, it is even more important to communicate in an empathetic and personal way, which is ultimately very important for the job.		
VS	[...] precisely these soft skills are becoming more important in sales and in our business relationships because, ultimately, people buy from people. You trust a person or team to deliver a certain performance, and that will probably become more important, there will be a shift.	Relationship skills become more relevant	
VT	Actually, I would say that relationship skills are probably even more relevant because you stand out from the crowd. We can differentiate ourselves simply by being willing to get on a train or a plane to run a workshop. I believe that this personal touch is important in a world where people are bombarded with information. With the help of AI, you can make mass outreach, send emails or standardised texts, and so on. I believe that this personal touch is important today more than ever.		
VT	.. that the topic shifts towards relationship building, and that it is really seen as a skill. I think that is becoming increasingly important. [...] At the end of the day, people always buy from people. I think that was also the case 100 years ago, but I'm almost convinced that it will become more important because otherwise, there is little differentiation between provider A and provider B outside of the product itself. And I believe that's what will decide, okay, which person do I have a		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	better connection with, which person have I built more trust with, and how does this person treat me so that I, as a buyer, can implement my personal and selfish aspects and requirements? And if you trust this person, I believe the sale will be easier than if this relationship-building is not present.		
AL	I would say a skill set that shifts. Whoever can't write good prompts today will be left behind. But if you can't empathize with your audience, you'll also be left behind because that can be automated. [...] This means that although you have easier access to information with AI, it's becoming more difficult to connect with people because people don't like receiving automated messages.	Sales skills are being leveled	
GK	It's all about this skill, this prompting, how to communicate clearly and precisely with the AI to get high-quality answers back. This is an art form in itself and something that you have to start training for now and developing an understanding.	Technical know-how and understanding	
TS	What I have to say is that, of course, a major aspect is how to deal with AI. In our company, for example, a lot of training is devoted to how to use it properly, what to do for AI assistance, which AI programmes to use for what, and so on. This is a huge part of our work and must be mastered.		
VT	Also, if it's just a formality to fill out a field in the CRM, send the presentation via email so the customer has something, etc. These are topics that, in my opinion, cost time and energy, are very simple, and can certainly be automated by AI tools. This frees up time to focus on the customer, in terms of relationship management.	Administrative and operational efficiencies	
ES	AI also indirectly helps to speed up the sales cycle, as the customer can select the shortlist of providers more quickly and efficiently based on the data provided.	Faster sales cycle	
MB	The main objective of AI integration is to increase the win rate.	Higher conversion rate	Increase in Productivity
CZ	And then also the increase in productivity when creating documents. This means that you always have the benefit of being able to get very nicely formulated texts for certain topic summaries, be it for certain e-mail communications, documents, etc. So that definitely translates into high-quality content.	Higher output quality	
SU	... I think I used it more for complex deals because that's where we, as a team, lacked knowledge and our own tools. For the complex deals, I use it more to help me with knowledge. [...] For standard deals or contracts, I use AI to ask questions about the contents, for example. [...] I would use it to increase the business flow for repetitive tasks or calculations. We will definitely have a higher volume of deals.	Higher quantity	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
RK	[...] for example, if our internal colleagues are not quick enough to provide material, you can use the accessible information sources to prepare things in advance. I would naturally use these chat functionalities a lot more quickly to prepare things and perhaps also give some colleagues a first draft to challenge. But then I am already providing something in advance. In that case, I would say that productivity has increased.	Knowledge management	
GC	[...] there is a clear increase in productivity, in terms of quantity alone, more opportunities through AI-supported activities, be it mailings, communication campaigns and so on [...] also LinkedIn Post, quite a good example that they are simply much more efficient than manual activities behind it. [...] Used to be much more difficult and time-consuming than it is today.		
GE	Added value, yes [...] You get to a first draft or output faster, but you still have to review it. Additionally, the coaching helps you to gain a qualitative overview of the client analysis more quickly.		
RZ	Yes, it is definitely a huge leap in productivity, because not only can I concentrate better, but all the follow-up work is made much easier[...] I easily save 30-45 minutes per customer just because I can create a really good follow-up email with a single click. [...]		
SU	AI has brought me many positive aspects, mainly in terms of time efficiency. [...] It has improved my time management and efficiency significantly. Since I've been using it more and more, I immediately know which tasks to use AI for. In terms of organization and time management, I would say that I have better skills thanks to AI.	More time efficient	
SU	In terms of time efficiency .. as well as time and task management, and the content itself, I'm definitely more productive when I collect notes from meetings, client feedback, and colleague feedback. I don't have to do it by hand anymore because I'm using AI.		
TZ	It definitely is a increase in productivity[...] it's quite clear, I definitely save half an hour of work every day. I don't work less, I just stay in the office longer and do other tasks, therefore I don't work less but I get more done. [...] so it definitely increases productivity, but you don't actually work less.		
UL	Well, obviously, I can see the productivity increase, and I would like to see more of it. [...] the ideal is to fill 100% of your day with activities that add value. That will never work, but I see that you can increase productivity by AI doing simple things like taking meeting minutes. While I think that's good, the intensity increases since you give up some of your free time to administrative tasks, which would allow you to clear your mind.		
HE	Yes, there are definitely productivity increases. ... a lot of topics and processes are made easier [...] provides structure and enables you to focus more on the customer. It is generally very helpful, and I also use the tools daily.	Providing structure	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
JK	[...] I believe that many changes will be necessary in sales. Using, understanding, and applying these AI tools correctly requires a basic understanding of IT. [...] It also requires an affinity for using and utilizing IT.	Human-AI Interaction Competency	
MB	I would argue that every salesperson tries to protect their assets to some extent. In Sales, these are often relations, insights, and the result of long active listening, understanding the buying team, and so on. Sharing these types of information is a big challenge for everyone, but it is certainly a key success factor.	Knowledge transfer	
VT	I think it's just a matter of trying things out and seeing where a AI can support you with communication, for example, with Prompting [...] all about experimenting, gaining experience and building a certain skill set.	Open mindset and test	
CZ	I think it's easy to lose track of the available tools and possibilities, so I think the open exchange is very beneficial. However, I also think it should be presented more concisely. We have a lot of training and options, but they get lost in the mass of information. We have a lot of training and options, but they get lost in the mix. You have to provide more AI information so that people become interested and develop further in the field. [...] I don't think we have an overview of everything that's possible.	Promote functionalities and value add	
AS	I believe the most important thing is to identify the skills of a good salesperson, determine where your strengths lie, and plan for future development. That means, what strengths can I really develop individually to achieve optimal performance, which will help me contribute. And what are certain challenges that I have and how can I use tools to compensate for them or support myself?	Skill identification and assessment	Next Steps
WS	[...] The tools have to be adapted to specific roles [...] the topic of change management has to be implemented well, how can I enable the team? [...] I also believe that this needs to be done on a role-specific basis, as sales is not always the same.	Tailor applications to specific sales roles in order to exploit potential	
AL	In my opinion, the topic of enablement is the most important for a leader, to make your team better and to be able to convey knowledge to them.	Team enablement and guidance	
MB	We must be critical enough to recognize when something is not right. We still need to read and understand it rather than simply using it blindly. We must train ourselves to do this over and over again. We should also consciously force ourselves to use AI in some way every day, regardless of whether it is for private or professional purposes.	To be critical	
TS	Well, I believe that one of the most important developments is that everyone individually continues to grow and develop, and that you check everything and contribute to it. That this type	To be up to date	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	of use becomes the most natural thing for you and is integrated into your workday. And I believe that as soon as you rest on the fact that you think you know everything you need to know, you fall behind.		
JK	We have our own responsibility to train the next generation, especially our junior colleagues. There is a lot of potential, as well as a lot of concern, about how we will develop the next generation. Perhaps simple tasks will be automated, but for me, those tasks are and will continue to be part of learning and training. It is the only way to develop the necessary skills to judge whether an AI's work is good or bad, right or wrong, understandable or incomprehensible. If you don't think things through yourself and always say, "Yes, I'll let the AI do it; it'll be fine," then you'll have a huge gap in your assessment skills.	Uncertainty about how to set up future talent	
VS	I would say that you learn the necessary skills through client feedback. The tools are very helpful, but we have to question whether the input we have received really matches the client's situation. Often, we work with a client, a department or a program for years and gain many insights into what is important to the client or the person on the other side. [...] In my view, a very important task for us is to use all the data and information we have to create something that really addresses the customer's pain points and makes them feel understood. [...] I believe this is an important area of work and one that we will be able to support in the future.		
TZ	[...] you have to force yourself to literally deal with it. It should be very clear on the agenda of a sales team and also salespeople that they use AI somewhere, because, as mentioned earlier, it enables, it takes the pressure off, it helps you do your job better [...]	Utilization is essential	
PW	[...] that you need to have all skills represented in the sales team, someone who brings their soft skills, someone who brings a lot of impact on all AI topics in order to have a hybrid team at the end to comprehensively address the client.	Company structure changes	
DS	When comparing, what I would call the sale of a simple product or simple sales versus complex sales, I would say that people skills are fundamentally just as important, but sales success in simple sales depends 100% on people skills, whereas in complex sales you naturally have to capture the big picture and this complexity[...]		Sales
DS	[...] people skills are very important for complex deals, but it's only half the battle, if you don't have these people skills, then you'll never be in a position to build this complex solution, to get the information you need for it. That means they are still just as important, but here they are only one part of the whole, whereas in simple sales they are the whole thing.	Differences between "complex" and "simple" deals	Insights
PW	As soon as it becomes more complex, the more human expertise is needed [...] in terms of output, an AI is only as smart as human intelligence [...] So as long as we can equip artificial intelligence with challenges and complexities, the better it will be at working on complex challenges.		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
GL	you have to differentiate between the traditional sales skills, such as communication, you have to understand your counterpart, you have to respond towards people better or generally respond to people to put yourself into their shoes. For me, these sales skills are currently linked to the skills that I mentioned earlier with adaptability and learning, which I would like to combine. Nowadays you have a completely different demand when it comes to sales roles.	Evolving demand on the sales role	
GK	[...] therefore, the sooner you start to familiarize yourself with the whole topic, the more you will realize that prompting and how you communicate with it is very important in order to achieve the best results.	Necessity to utilize AI	
BL	[...] something I have a lot of respect for is how do you differentiate between the companies? [...] I think in sales, topics that are sort of standard [...] there is hardcore outsourcing, the production of proposals, the production of credentials, the creation of solutions [...] But then again, the language and so on, it's all a similar structure which means that the companies don't distinguish themselves. I believe that the character of a company comes out very clearly. And then it will again depend on with whom the customer really wants to work with and then I believe that the trust aspect will play a very important role		
BL	Where will you differentiate yourself? For example, in one deal we simply said to the client, look, our office is across the street from you [...] We deliberately make the presentation in German. We only brought people with us who have seen it all the time and then this relationship, the human aspect, the sales skill, to emphasize those points very strongly [...] and because we believe that this really differentiates us [...] these are the points where, in my opinion, a lot depends on network trust, innovation and that changes even more.	Relationship is essential for sales	
HE	To be honest, I don't think relationship skills will become obsolete. Because this relationship aspect is so important in sales, I still think you need to build strong relationships with customers.		
RK	I believe that soft skills are still just as relevant. In my experience, price has become a much more important factor in sales and tendering processes, so price competitiveness is key. To differentiate yourself from the competition on this issue, the topic of relationship management and having the right access to customers has become even more important, because otherwise it's just a price war.		
RZ	100%, traditional sales skills are just as relevant as they were 10-15 years ago [...] from my perspective in B2B SaaS sales, the most important thing is that "at the end of the day, it's a people business." And first and foremost, the customer doesn't immediately buy the product, of course, but rather buys you as a person because they associate you with the product. Whether the product is software, a service, or something else doesn't really matter because, in the first instance, you		

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	are the face of that product, and in my opinion, it's extremely important that the empathy and sympathy are genuine.		
WS	I think that sales skills will remain because sales is simply a prototype of people business [...] but at the end of the day, metaphorically speaking, it's a handshake that closes a deal. [...] but will it replace the sales profile, I don't see that happening.		
ES	You can say it helps with sales acquisition, sales forecasting, sales qualification and decision making [...] it helps with customer loyalty and buying patterns [...] in general it reduces the cost of sales by making it faster, more efficient and the whole predictability	Reduction of sales cost	
MB	I would have a big question mark if AI could develop the entire sales strategy. ... Sales is more art than science. [...] and AI can't anticipate the interpersonal aspect yet.	Sales expertise remains human-driven	
RK	We always know certain things about the customer, such as how a sub-layer should be built, what should be used, what should be avoided. I believe we can only find out the details thanks to this know-how of our people who work closely with the client. [...] This is a good division of labour. Creating the basic structure, perhaps also structures for a foundation. How can the following topic be presented effectively? [...] Then, we can put the cherry on top and say that it is now tangible for the customer with all its elements that we already know.	Sales expertise remains human-driven	
UL	I would always say that, at least currently, the ability to think holistically and associate information is something that AI simply cannot do because it does not have the information. Because there are various restrictions. ... I know everything that happens in communication with the customer over SMS, WhatsApp, Teams, Email and so on [...] The AI doesn't know that. I would always say that I still have the advantage over the AI.		
GE	Relationship skills are still very relevant. I think the problem nowadays, post-Corona, is that things have changed. There are fewer opportunities for those classic, unplanned interactions with client and the chance to pick up some information. Everything is done in scheduled meetings, with less of this informality.	Sales landscape is evolving	
GL	I think many people don't realize that sales is changing in a certain way, because you have to deal with all the technologies first and find the right approach for you [...] Sales today is still the same as it was back then, whether it's direct sales or large deals [...] these are all things that remain relevant, but in a dramatically new environment that you have to adapt to.		

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
UL	If procurement becomes fully automated with standardized RFPs, the key skills I see today could become obsolete, and you could respond to an AI-generated RFP with an AI. Because it's just standardized and comparable, and you probably won't need all this sales wording and sales machine with flowers and cherries on it, and so on. Maybe you won't need that in the future. Maybe it will be reduced to pure comparability and analytics.		
TS	If it's a traditional or values-based company, then I automatically focus more on relationship-building. But if I see that it's a highly innovative company that's very future-oriented, then naturally, I can also go more into the technical aspect.	Sales Skills are individual and industry specific	
RK	The first top skill, I would say, is listening. We tend to tell the customer too much, ask fewer questions, and don't wait for the answers. Asking questions, listening, understanding the customer's perspective, and correctly sorting out their concerns is, in my opinion, a key skill.	Active listening	
WS	I would also mention a fourth skill[...] listening. In sales, you have to listen. What does the customer want? Because if you haven't answered this question, the sales process doesn't even begin. In other words, asking questions and listening is actually the number one skill.		
CZ	The most important sales skills [...] Willingness to adapt, which means you have to look at things from different angles and often respond to the customer. You can also adapt to new situations relatively quickly, especially in negotiations. That means, of course, it's exactly the same as with technological changes [...] That you try to adapt them as quickly as possible and integrate them into everyday life.	Adaptability	Sales Skills
GL	[...]it's really struck me lately, when I look back over the last few years: adaptability[...] because I believe that sales will always remain sales, but the role in sales will change. [...]customers also have a more demanding profile, or a customer may have different requirements, and you have to adapt to that, which is why I say adaptability is probably the most important skill you need to be well positioned for the future, in my opinion.		
TS	Ambition is definitely the most important thing of all... everyone wants to be the best, it is very competitive and if you just follow along, you won't succeed.	Ambition	
HE	You should have the analytical skills to assess whether this offer could suit the customer and think ahead. What else could you offer the customer? How could you offer them the whole package in a different way?	Analytical thinking	
BL	Having a comprehensive end-to-end understanding of the challenge and then translating that into what the customer really needs. This has become much more complex over the decades, because digitization and everything behind it, but really meaning everything from strategic consulting to	Client understanding	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	IT projects and outsourcing products, the entire value chain has become more and more complex and you can grasp it less and less than it used to be to some extent.		
GE	[...] there are larger opportunities and larger deals with multiple stakeholders at the customer's end. I like to call this complex selling. It's not just about going somewhere and convincing one person that your product is the best. Rather, there are multiple stakeholders, client needs, buying criteria, relationships, and other factors to consider. For example, is there a third party advising the client? [...] It's important to understand how the customer thinks, what their needs are, and how the decision-making process works.		
GK	[...] In terms of top sales skills, I would say it's all about good discovery, which means having a good understanding of how they do business, act and thinks and overall the customer's challenges and situation. So, it's more about us doing detective work. [...] It actually just consists of really recognizing what the main problem of the customer is and what the main objectives of the company are.		
BL	And of course, from a sales perspective, the commercial acumen, which means a sales perspective on how a business case works for the client and also for your own company, keyword business case, keyword final price...	Commercial and business case understanding	
JK	The second skill is to really say what is relevant and what are the market trends that matter to the customer. This also means understanding in the sales team or as a sales skill, what are market trends in an IT market. [...] to really understand what is relevant for the market, what are current solutions.		
HE	You must be very good at communicating ... because you have to deal with so many different people and negotiate with various parties effectively.		
UL	I believe communication is the most important thing, whether it's internal or external. [...] This includes communicating with customers, making sure they understand you and that you don't use a language they might not understand. On the other hand, you have to promote your topic internally to get the right people on board, highlight its importance, among other things. [...] on the customer side, it's often about simplicity, so you can translate the internal language for the customer, and ensure that you meet the customer requirements. [...] internally, you have to address the stakeholders, get them on board.	Communication skills	
PW	For me, the top skills that a good sales person should bring to the table are soft skills such as active listening, empathy, communication and a certain amount of curiosity.		
UL	I believe that empathy is unbeatable. I often see colleagues, and this is not necessarily only in sales, but in general in customer interaction, push through their agenda without really listening to and understanding what the customer needs and wants.	Empathy	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
WS	Number three of the sales skills is about gut feeling, which means understanding facts at the right moments, understanding interpersonal issues and formulating actions accordingly. In other words, it's intuition [...] the ability to intuitively do things right, at the right time, in the right place		
AS	[...] A relationship is of course very important, so it's good to have an open mind and understand different types of people, and to have a little bit of people skills. Then you can tell if you're dealing with someone who is more analytical or someone who thinks more creatively or who values the relationship more.	Intuitive Judgement	
GL	The topic of learning, especially in the time where we are now is an incredible time of change [...] exponential growth in the field of AI and you can't learn everything there either, that's also clear, especially in the sales area there are certain things that will always remain your skillset, but there are also things that you have to learn[...]	Learning	
CZ	Negotiating skills require a great deal of preparation and the will to do so. Planning reliability, including planning and preparation, is also a very big part of the job. Planning and preparation are also very important parts of the job. [...] This is the basis for your negotiating skills. [...]	Negotiating skills	
AS	[...] the top sales skills, on the one hand, align quite well with an organizational perspective. You have a clear view of the sales process and know how to organize yourself and your team in the individual phases.		
GE	It's not just about selling to the customer; you also have to sell it internally. You have to fight for resources internally, organize things properly and orchestrate them so that the right things end up with the customer.	Organizational talent	
HE	[...] to be this connecting point for all areas and the different teams. There are always a lot of stakeholders involved in the sales process and you are responsible for keeping everyone together. I think you need to be able to see the big picture, be organized and keep track of the entire process.		
MB	[...]and in the end, a problem-solving mentality. You have to focus on trying to solve the issue instead of pointing out why it's not working.	Problem-solving mentality	
PW	Then, of course, hard skills in the form of methodical skills, which we now call good negotiating skills. You have to be able to present, as well as bring the solution know-how, in other words, what do I want to sell ...		
UL	If we're talking about AI in particular, I think you need a certain technical understanding. [...] don't need a technical qualification, but you should at least have a basic understanding of what can be done and what might help the customer or not. I always talk about content-free sales, because it's not enough to just put something together for the customer; you also need to understand it.	Product or services know-how	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
AR	The number one factor is, quite clearly, that people buy from people, or in other words, trust to build a genuine relationship. In my view, this is the number one issue, because we live in a world where trust is particularly important in sales. The projects we work on, especially ones of this size, are not simple, but complex, and require trust as a basis.		
HE	I think those relationship skills are very important because, ultimately, everything depends on them. [...] It's not always about the cheapest offer, it's also about how you behave towards the client and what the relationship is like.		
MB	... and relationship building is an important skill as well. This involves assessing the relationship matrix of customers. In my opinion and experience, these are simply essential competencies that everyone should have.	Relationship building	
SU	Social skills are important because there are many interactions with customers and different teams, such as technical, sales, and sustainability teams. So, yes, the most important thing is social skills, or social interactions.		
WS	[...] one of these top skills is always relationship building, which in my opinion is also the foundation for collaboration.		
RZ	[...] Resilience, or perseverance, because you first have to get a customer interested in you and then hang in there until the customer is actually closed.	Resilience	
AL	I call it Resourcefulness[...] Is this someone who can think outside the box and introduce new ideas and different approaches? Is it someone who can quickly familiarize themselves with different tool landscapes? Is it someone who can take a step back and quickly draw conclusions about the inner workings of an organization based on publicly available information and also determine the business impact of their own solution on the organization as a whole?	Resourcefulness	
GC	Basically, the topic of relationships and social selling [...] is a skill that is a process that starts somewhere with the initial contact with the first email, with the first phone call, whether it is by LinkedIn [...] and to find out through specific questions who the right contact person is, what the contact person's goals are, that is particularly important. [...] what challenges the company is facing. Clearly, the personal goals are usually in the foreground in order to have a so-called gateway and then build a relationship. But also, what are the corporate goals behind it, because the person must of course sell these goals or this solution that is to be purchased somewhere in the organization internally in order to find the internal stakeholders who then also make the decision.	Social Selling	
VT	The second skill, which AI has certainly changed, but which I have always considered important, is the ability to establish a personal connection with the person you are talking to, understand who	Stakeholder selling	

Interviewee	Direct Citation	Second order theme	Category
	they are, what is important to them, how they work in their job, how they are evaluated [...]. and why the solution you are selling is actually relevant for this person.		
VT	[...] this personal touch and creativity to tell a certain story in the sales process is actually a hard requirement for all sales and partner managers, because otherwise the skill set is missing to close such deals.	Storytelling	
WS	The second top sales skill is strategic thinking [...] this means to work out a plan, to develop it logically, to understand connections and then prepare them in such a way that they are also convincing	Strategic thinking	
VS	Another issue is how you interact with your colleagues. I see it as an important part of my job to enable my team to perform at their best, considering the short timelines we have during projects and deals. [...] It's important to have a sense of solidarity and team spirit.	Team enablement	
GL	Of course you also need hard skills from my point of view, because you need an understanding of the technologies. You need to know what's available, because in the end, even in sales, there will be points or aspects or questions where other companies or other employees are naturally ahead of you if you don't have the tools or skills at hand.	Technology proficiency	