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How Has IT Impacted the B2B Sales Process?

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Abstract

How Has IT Impacted B2B Sales?

B2B sales role plays a major role in driving the economy, and this industry has been experiencing major changes over the year with the advances in technology which allow for more cost savings and driving for more efficient ways of conducting sales operations.

The objective of this exploratory qualitative research paper was to raise interest in the role technology plays in the B2B sales process today from the salesperson's view point. It was further partly built on previous research on B2B sales and how this has developed over time. This study looks to broaden the existing research on how the sales process as a whole is being impacted by the use of communication technology and data collection and analysis technology. A second goal was to deepen the understanding of how technology impacts two specific parts of the sales process; communication and relationship building between the customer and the sales person. A third goal was to gain a better understanding of the differences between the field sales role and the virtual sales role, in order to gain better insight into the benefits and weaknesses of the use of technology in the sales process.

The study included five research participants who have held both field and virtual sales roles in Cisco. Through qualitative interviews, it was discovered that virtual sales leads to a shorter sales cycle and a higher quality of service. The research participants attributed higher frequency of communication, flexibility, richer data sharing, ease of communication and information gathering to this conclusion.

By understanding how salespersons perceive virtual sales in itself, but also how they compare it to field sales, organizations can get a better understanding as to where the strengths of each sales role lie, and leverage these strengths. Furthermore, better insight into how technology is used in virtual and field sales can further give insight into how technology can be developed, changed, and used, to work better for the organization's sales force.

1. Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1 Need for Study

B2B sales plays a major role in driving the economy. IT vendors like Cisco are helping companies leverage the use of technology and IT innovations to help them reach their business outcomes. By aiding companies reach their business outcomes, companies are able to provide higher quality products and services to end users in more efficient, environmentally ways.

The B2B sales environment has been experiencing massive changes the past years. Business customers are increasingly behaving like consumers by making use digital solutions enabling for self-service purchasing. This has led to sales professionals having to change the way in which they operate, requiring an adoption of digital solutions in the selling process to match their customers digitisation (Driggs & Hergesell, 2017).

Inside sales, or virtual sales as it is referred to in Cisco, entails handling sales remotely and using technology as a mediator in communication. Virtual salespersons will solely, or primarily use virtual collaboration tools in the sales process when communicating with a customer. Advances in technology has made it possible for virtual sales persons to conduct sales meetings using solutions that truly give a sense of being in the same room as the customer. These advances in technology has also enabled salespersons to conduct demonstrations of solutions, give presentations and perform the majority of traditional sales functions, all through virtual collaboration tools (Davis, 2017). Between 2011 and 2013, 46% of participants in a Harvard Business Review study reported shifting from field sales to virtual sales (Martin, 2013).

Furthermore, communication through virtual solutions has been adopted as a typical form of communication due to the benefits it brings to B2B firms, to the sales teams and to the customers. According to Harvard Business Review, 72% of business leaders say “effective team communication” has become more important the past years, and 64% of the surveyed leaders reported that collaboration with external parties has increased in importance

(“Collaboration – Improve Customer Satisfaction with Collaboration,” 2016). Virtual sales solutions allow for customers and sellers to communicate more productively, whenever and wherever suits both parties best. It further allows for faster problem resolution and easier transfer for information (“Collaboration – Improve Customer Satisfaction with Collaboration,” 2016) This benefit can enhance the customer satisfaction, and simplify the sales process for the sales representative, leading to a happier customer who may be willing to settle for a higher price in a shorter sales cycle (“Collaboration - Increase Productivity with Better Collaboration,” 2016).

The technological complexity of the products and services in the IT B2B industry has been shown to play a role in whether a company will make a transition from field sales to inside sales (Martin, 2013). With increasingly complex products and solutions, customers and sales representatives need several more meetings to share all required information for a sales person to be able to close a sale. This would entail high costs related to travelling for meetings, as well as for demonstrations of products and solutions. Virtual sales solutions reduce the need for travelling, as communication through life-like, high quality solutions are simplified. These benefits are vital for firms in fast changing industries and for business leaders looking to improve efficiency and increase sales.

The change in demographic in organizations has also led to changes in how IT is being used in the sales process. Today, an increasing number of young professionals are found in high or mid-level positions in buying teams. The younger buyers in customer organizations are thus causing a shift in the communication technique, from typical face to face communication, to technology based communication methods (Shackleton, 2016).

Another major trend that has affected the B2B industry that has led to changes in use of technology is globalisation. Companies are no longer solely operating from the place in which they were established, but from whatever market can offer the biggest advantages in terms of resources and costs. This trend has led to changes in communication methods for companies in all industries. Sales processes are thus no longer being solely conducted face to face due to geographical barriers. That has led to people having had to learn to communicate through virtual meetings, taking into account body language, time differences and cultural

awareness in speech (Ingram, n.d).

Today, Cisco uses collaboration solutions massively in sales operations, and has a large inside sales team. There is currently limited research on inside sales, though research on virtual team effectiveness is more common. Researching how the sales process has been impacted by the use of IT solutions for communication as well as relationship building may shed light on the benefits and challenges these virtual collaboration tools bring. Discovering how a salesperson has had to adapt in their sales role due to the changes in communication and the available information on customers and the market may also give insight into how much value these technological tools bring to the salesperson, customer, and to the deal.

1.2 Research Question

In this research paper, information will be collected on Cisco sales employees to get a better understanding into how field sales and inside sales differ. The paper will also aim to discover how improvements in technology has impacted the way B2B sales is conducted for inside and field salespersons. Furthermore, this paper aims to discover what challenges and benefits are linked to the use technology in communication and relationship building in the B2B sales cycle.

How has IT impacted B2B sales?

To be able to answer this research question, there needs to be a clarification as to what kind of technology is used in the B2B sales cycle in terms of communication and rapport building, and for what purpose. Furthermore, there needs to be an understanding in the differences between field sales, and virtual sales, in order to understand how technology affects the sales role and sales process. It is thus important to have an understanding of the typical sales cycle in Cisco. It would also be beneficial to have an understanding as to what parts of the sales cycle in which virtual tools are the most vital for a virtual salesperson, and what the value and problems associated to the virtual communication are in the different parts of the sales cycle. Technology solutions that relate to data collection and analysis,

which are used in building rapport and relationship with customers will also have to be explored further.

1.3 Scope

The scope of this research paper will be limited to only looking at field sales and virtual sales within Cisco's salesforce. This implies solely looking at salespersons who have had the job title "Account Manager," which is field sales, and "Virtual Sales Account Manager."

Another limitation that will be set to the research paper is in terms of geography. Cisco has field sales offices in 95 countries (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 9) and the norms for communication and sales may vary from country to country due to cultural differences. Furthermore, the technological infrastructure availability of the customers may be very different between countries and continents. In order to make the research paper as credible as possible, focusing on one type of region may yield more reliable results. The paper will thus focus solely on the Scandinavian sales personnel; which includes Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. This is on the basis that I will be working in sales at the Sweden office with close collaboration to the Norwegian office. Furthermore, my colleagues include several Danish and Finnish sales associates.

1.4 Definition of Terms

Virtual collaboration tools can be defined as products and services that unify voice, data and mobile applications for collaborations. These are also referred to as virtual collaboration solutions or virtual communication tools. In this research paper, the collaboration tools that will be relevant are Spark, WebEx, TelePresence. These collaboration solutions are described in greater detail in Chapter 3 – Case Description.

Virtual sales is a term that is primarily used in Cisco. The majority of the industry calls B2B sales that is conducted from inside the office over communication tools as inside sales. The definition of "virtual sales" for this research paper is; performing activities from the start to the end of the sales cycle, aimed at closing a sale between a customer and a sales representative, through the use of virtual collaboration tools.

1.5 Structure of The Paper

Chapter 1 aimed to give an overview of the need to study the changes in the B2B sales process in terms of increasing technological use in the industry. The chapter presents the research question, the scope of the paper, as well as definition of key terms that are central to the paper.

Chapter 2 is the literature part of the paper. It will include references to theories and research papers that give insight into the B2B sales process, key characteristics to B2B sales, as well as how it has changed over the years. This chapter is followed chapter 3, which includes a presentation of the model to visualize the research question. This chapter further includes an explanation of the variables that the paper aims to discover, those variables being key parts of the B2B sales process that has been affected by the use in IT, and how that has changed B2B sales as a process.

Chapter 4 includes a case description. The paper looks at how IT has impacted B2B sales in the context of Cisco. This chapter thus gives insight into the virtual collaboration tools that Cisco uses in its virtual sales process to give a formal presentation of the solutions that are expected to be mentioned in the interview-phase of the paper. Furthermore, this chapter includes an overview of Cisco's sales force, giving insight into the differences between field sales and inside sales at Cisco, and how their operations are conducted in terms of communication with their own managers, as well as with their customers.

Chapter 5 looks at the methodology of the paper, and explains the basis for the choice of an inductive approach. It further explains how data collection and analysis will be conducted, in order to be able to answer the research question in a reliable, and valid way. The following chapter, chapter 6 will present the results from the interviews. The results will be presented in accordance to the model presented in chapter 3, so divided into communication results and results related to relationship between customer and seller. The following chapter, chapter 7, will relate to analysis of the results in accordance to the literature and theories presented in chapter 2. The analysis part will be presented in three parts, technology in the sales process, communication, and lastly the relationship between customer and seller.

The paper will end with chapter 8 which relates to the discussion and implications of the research. It will present a discussion of the results, and the theoretical implications and managerial implications of the results that were discovered in the research. Limitations and future research will then be presented, followed by a conclusion.

2. Chapter 2 - Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to get an understanding of what B2B sales is through looking at its history and the sales cycle. This chapter further aims to understand how B2B has changed over the years as a result of technological changes and changes in customer expectations. Within the changes in B2B due to disruptions from technology, this chapter will look specifically at how communication and the customer-seller relationship has changed. This chapter will thus give an overview of B2B sales, the B2B sales cycle, how communication has evolved due to the availability of virtual collaboration tools, and how relationships in B2B sales has evolved.

An overview of B2B sales and the sales cycle will give context for the rest of the theories presented. Understanding what B2B sales is gives a clear indication as to what characteristics makes up B2B sales, which gives a scope as to what we should focus on when looking at how it has changed with the use of technology. Furthermore, understanding the B2B sales cycle allows us to understand how much importance communication and customer-seller relationship plays, and in what parts of the process. This can thus allow for the comparison of how the sales cycle typically is considered to be, and how it is perceived as being today with the use of advanced virtual collaboration tools.

Research on the how virtual collaboration impacts communication is vital to understand how much value virtual communication tools bring to B2B sales, or how it may impact the communication negatively. Understanding the value and downsides to communication over virtual communication tools as opposed to face to face will give an understanding of how this impacts the sales cycle. This may further give insight as to how technology has impacted the strength and nature of relationships between seller and buyer.

How the relationship between buyer and seller has evolved in B2B sales with the changes in use of technology in terms of virtual collaboration tools may give insight into how it has impacted the sales process. This may give insight into how information sharing has changed,

how the frequency of communication has been impacted, and thus what effect it has had on the sales cycle. It may further give insight into how the use of technology has changed the nature of the relationship, whether it has made them stronger or weaker in terms of trust and reliance on the other party.

2.2 B2B Sales Overview

B2B sales relates to businesses selling to businesses, as opposed to businesses selling to end-consumers (B2C). In B2B sales, the transaction often entails the sale of complex product, and these transactions can account for a large amount of business for the seller. Furthermore, within B2B sales, there are many more individuals included in the sales and purchasing process (Anderson, Erik, Chu & Barton, 1987; Johnston & Bonoma 1981), which further enhances the complexity of the buying and selling dynamics. Because a large number of people are involved in the sales and purchase process in B2B sales, the sales process is often longer, and entails more relationship building in order to form trust between the two companies and the different stakeholders. (Schmitz, 2012). Peters and Fletcher (2004) state that finding value to a group of people in the buyer organization requires higher frequency in communication and, Mohr and Nevin (1990), state that this requires moving from a transaction-based relationship to a relational-relationship. Cannon and Perrault (1999) also state that the relationship between a buyer and a seller in a B2B context has shifted from a self-interest focused transaction to a relation-oriented one, which focuses on long-term cooperativity. According to Hunter and Perreault (2006, 2007) relational selling requires a qualitative-outcome measure as opposed to quantitative, because the success of relational selling is measured based on relationship performance. These qualitative seller-customer relationship performance measures are presented under three categories; sales relationship effectiveness (Hunter, Perreault & Armstrong 1998), performance with customer (Hunter and Perreault, 2006), and relationship-building performance (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). All three relate to sales tasks performed by the seller that aim to build and strengthen the mutually beneficial relationship with its customer, and to increase the levels of satisfaction in the relationship (Hunter and Perrault, 2007).

Sales has a rich history that goes back all the way to the ancient world, and became increasingly important in the start of the 20th century. Sales as profession is still evolving

with time and changes in technology, customers, and the competitive landscape. Despite sales coming from the ancient times and making it to modern days, the “seven steps of selling” is still considered the most widely accepted archetype in the sales discipline. The seven steps of selling are as follow; 1) prospecting, 2) pre-approach, 3) approach, 4) presentation, 5) overcoming objections, 6) close, 7) follow up. The first six can be found in books dating back to the 1920s. The 7th step however was added more recently than the first six. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2004)

A clear way in which sales has evolved is from sales moving from a closed and forceful technique to a process based on relationships with customers. Selling through the basis of relationships requires developing, maintaining and securing a long-term relationship to a customer. The reason for this transition has been stated to be based on behavioural changes in customers. These behavioural changes are specially related to customer expectation, avoidance of buyer-seller negotiations, increasing competition and globalization, which all has affected the way the sales job has been evolving (Moncrief & Marshall, 2004).

In order to get insight into how B2B sales has been affected by technology, the characteristics that make up B2B sales will be looked at further. These characteristics that separate B2B sales to B2C sales are often referred to being longer sales cycles, more reliance on personal selling, larger dollar mount transactions, and fewer customers in more geographically concentrated areas (Schmitz, 2012).

2.3 Sales Cycle

Sales process and change in use of technology

Scanzoni, Burgess & Huston (1979) describes the sales process in the context of the evolvement of a customer-seller relationship. This process is typically presented in a five-phase process; awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987) Moncrief and Marshall (2004) on the other hand present a seven-step sales process that has been accepted in the history of sales, as it gives insight into the actions a seller has to conduct in order to conduct a sale. Moncrief and Marshall (2005) describe the seven steps, and how these have evolved over time (Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999).

The first step, prospecting entails how salespeople find potential new customer. Traditionally, salesforces were to find their own prospects through networking, referrals and cold-calling. A transformative factor for this step has been telemarketing, internet selling and organizational prospecting, which has led to better customer retention and deletion. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999). Technology systems in forms of software products also enable for data analysis to be automated, to facilitate turning customer information and data to opportunities for viable business opportunities (Kenworthy, 2001).

Pre-approach in a traditional sales situation entails all the activities necessary to conduct before the actual physical visit to the prospect or customer. This may have included re-reading through customer information, getting through gatekeepers, or rehearsing their pitch for the customer. This process has evolved through the use of online account data and support staff (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Kenworthy, 2001). All information on a customer can now be found at the touch of a button through customer databases and customer websites (Moncrief & Marshall, 2004; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999). Moncrief and Marshall (2004) highlight that technology has greatly facilitated the pre-approach step.

The third step, based on Moncrief and Marshall's (2005) seven steps, is the approach. This consists of the strategies and tactics the salesperson uses to get the attention of the prospect or customer. This step has evolved to becoming more of a discovery meeting. Before the approach phase today, the salesperson is already well informed on the customer, and the salesperson will thus only contact the customer with a clear idea of their issues and a solution.

The presentation is the fourth step. This step occurs after the needs of the customer has been understood, and the salesperson presents the selling points and attributes of their solution. Today, this step is conducted over several meetings where the customer is doing most of the talking. PowerPoints have become a transformational factor in this phase, as well as laptop with access to internet, where the salesperson easily can look up information the customer

may be asking for (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999). Overcoming objections has typically been about answering questions to objections during a presentation. This has evolved through predetermining the needs of a customer, or answering any concerns they may have had in previous calls.

The second to last step, closing, has typically entailed the salesperson directly asking for the business after the presentation and answering of objections, and the customer would simply accept or decline. This has evolved to the customer and salesperson working together to solve a goal for the customer, creating a long-lasting relationship as opposed to a short-term transaction in the past. Lastly, the follow-up step has typically been done through a phone call or letter or through a physical visit to the to see if their issues were resolved. Marshall and Moncrief (2005) emphasize here that the key transformative factor in this phase was the increased effectiveness of communication thanks to technology. Emails have majorly facilitated the ability of salespersons to quickly find out if the customer is happy with their purchase. Email is also stated to be more efficient than the typical phone call, as it has become increasingly difficult to reach the desired person by phone in an organization.

Despite these steps being widely accepted as the basis for sales processes, the research paper lists seven more steps, which are the new key steps in modern sales. These are 1) customer retention and deletion, 2) database and knowledge management, 3) nurturing the relationship, 4) marketing the product, 5) problem solving, 6) adding value, and 7) customer relationship management.

These traditional steps the transformative factor that has evolved the sales process give a clear indication as to how technology already has affected the sales process, long before the very recent advances in technology. A key point to remember from the evolving of sales steps is how access to data and communication has been greatly supported by changes in technology, and the benefit that has had on salespersons. The evolved steps clearly show how the sales job has been broadened, and how technology would play an important role in supporting each of these evolved phases.

2.4 Role of IT In B2B Sales

According to Marshall, Byrd, Gardiner, and Rainer (2002), companies are spending millions of dollars on implementing technology solutions to increase productivity and competitiveness, as well to meet clients' demands. B2B companies are further investing in technologies on the basis of the expectation that it will have a significant positive effect on performance (Hunter & Perreault, 2006; Moncrief, Lamb & Mackay, 1991). B2B sales companies are thus aiming to enable their salesforce to be more mobile through the use video conferencing, virtual private networks, and electronic data exchange (Anderson, 1996). According to Hughes, McKee and Singler (1999), there is an increasing demand on salespeople, which is reducing the time they have available to communicate with their customers. Technology is thus being used a way to enable sales people to spend more time with their customers, and to give them the flexibility in connecting the sales people to the customer (Davenport & Pearlson, pg 54, 1998). Furthermore, technology plays a major role in facilitating the communication and relationship between the customer and seller, and enabling data into usable information to cater to customers' needs (Clark, Rocco & Bush, 2007)

According to Hoefling (2012), using technology to allow salespeople to virtually connect with their customers has empowered salespeople to be flexible, and has thus become a major incentive for sales people. The point that technology is driving higher productivity and efficiency in salesforces is reinforced by Merrill Lynch reporting they experienced a 15 to 20% increase in productivity after one year with virtual collaboration solutions (Wells, 2001).

According to Hunter & Perreault (2007), the use of technology is said to influence the performance of sales in three ways in terms of information; access, analysing and communicating. Technology facilitates data collection, and further simplifies the practice of communicating and analysing the collected data. This further enables the possibility to share information and propose integrative solutions (Hunter & Perreault, 2006).

2.5 Communication Between Buyer and Seller

In B2B sales processes, a larger amount of people need to be involved in the buying process than in B2C. Communication thus plays an important role in increasing trust and commitment between the buyer and the seller (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, communication between the seller and all stakeholders is necessary to enhance positive emotions (Anderson & Narus 1990), reduce uncertainty (Moriarty & Spekman, 1984), as well as to identify all the different stakeholder's needs (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Face to face communication however requires all the relevant people in the seller and customer organization to be present at the same time and place, which makes it unlikely that the communication can take place in such a manner in the long term (Daft, 1983).

There are four aspects to communication in B2B relationships, according to Mohr and Nevin (1990). These are frequency, direction, modality and content. Frequency refers to how often the customer and seller communicate. Direction relates to whether the communication is one sided, as in emails, or two-sided as in a conversation. Modality is about the platform used for communication, and lastly, content relates to the message.

A high frequency in communication between the seller and customer plays a major role in ensuring value is being created to all stakeholders (Peters and Fletcher, 2004). Furthermore, Mohr and Nevin (1990) highlight the need to change the focus from a transaction-based relationship to a relational one. In order for a salesperson to be profitable and the customer to be satisfied, communication between the seller and buyer has to be managed (Ramani & Kumar, 2008).

High frequency, informal and two-way based communication between a seller and a customer in a B2B context is associated with greater relational and market exchange (Mohr & Nevin 1990). Face to face communication has been demonstrated to increase the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour, but also to make it more difficult to identify (Jap, 2011). In comparison, digital communication enables for the possibility to save information and later retrieve this information, which makes opportunistic behaviour more identifiable and less likely to occur (Rindfleisch, Antia, Bercovitz, Brown, Cannon, Carson, Gosh,

Helper, Robertson, & Wathne, 2010).

In terms of communication between a buyer and a seller in a B2B context, communication quality, formality, two-way communication and high frequency all contribute to higher satisfaction (Mohr & Sohi, 1995). It is further in communication that the seller can truly best identify potential opportunities for its customer (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). Whether informal or formal communication is optimal in a buyer-seller context varies between research paper. Anderson and Wietz (1989) for example, state that informal communication allows for goal congruence as it is simpler to adapt to meanings and interpretations to find a common ground. Furthermore, informal communication in a face to face setting enables more depth in conversation by giving access to more cues, such as facial expressions (Donato, Bartlett, Hager & Ekman, 1999) and tone of voice (Scherer, 1986). Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin (1996), however, state that collaborative communication is based on formal communication.

2.6 Virtual Communication Between Buyer and Seller

As has been explored earlier on, communication plays a major role in the success of a salespersons job. Communication plays a major role throughout the entire sales process, and is thus the basis for a customer-seller relationship, which has been discovered to be a vital part of the modern sales trend. The way in which communication has changed in B2B due to the increasing use of technology and the growing importance of virtual sales will further be explored here, as it is a key factor in understanding how IT has impacted the B2B sales process.

Collaboration entails two or more people communicating and working together to accomplish a common goal (Beyerlein & Harris, 2004). Collaboration is a process that includes coordination, knowledge sharing, shared understanding, trust, structure, communication and relationship (Kotlarsky & Oshri, 2005). Communication is the “verbal interchange of thought or idea (Hoben, 1954). Communication and collaboration in a virtual environment has been discovered to lead with issues regarding coordinating tasks, ensuring understanding and knowledge sharing, coordination, trust and relationship development (Hinds & Weisband, 2003; Peters & Manz, 2007; Piccoli, Powell, & Ives, 2004). On the

other hand, collaboration in virtual environment is said to lead to stronger goal congruity, increased quality of performance and greater task focus (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001, p. 1254).

Communication problems that typically arise when communication technologies were used are said to be lack of non-verbal cues, information delay and loss, technical failure in communication, decreased job satisfaction, lack of effective working patterns and information sharing, poor relationship between members, shorter windows of communication time, poor message clarity and delayed feedback. (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006) Furthermore, advanced virtual collaboration tools often reduce non-verbal cues about interpersonal relationships, such as tone, warmth and attentiveness. These characterises contribute to message clarity and the richness of communication (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Virtual communication is increasingly important for transnational organizations, as people are found separated by geographical distances and time zone differences. This has led to the need for communication methods mediated by technology to allow for communication and collaboration (Workman, 2006). Virtual communication is said to enables flexibility as it enables the sharing of information at a higher speed. Other benefits related to virtual communication include reduction in costs, higher long-term profitability, increased productivity and higher service quality. Another benefit to virtual conferencing between buyer and seller is pointed out by Zecher (1994), who states that virtual conferencing also increases the frequency of meetings.

Furthermore, virtual communication in the form of desktop video conferencing allows for more complex levels of communication than face to face communication. This is supported by the fact that with virtual communication, one is able to share data in more ways than is possible in a face to face meeting (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). This point is reinforced by Zecher (1994) who explains that with video conferencing, people on the virtual meeting are able to share charts and graphs in real-time. Furthermore, information processing among salespersons and customers is facilitated through technology solutions through improved communication and a reduction in uncertainty (Leifer & Delbecq, 1978; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981)

2.7 Customer-Seller Relationship in B2B Sales

In B2C sales, customers can be reached through simple marketing efforts. In B2B however, sales persons must take a more direct, hands-on approach to reach and appeal to its customers. Personal selling has thus become a key difference in the relationship building aspect between B2B and B2C sales (Sutton & Klein, 2006). The four basic customer relationship stages in B2B sales are exploration, build-up, maturity and decline. Each of these phases rely on the salesperson to provide the necessary information and advice to the customer to form the basis for a long-term and positive relationship between buyer and seller (Jap, 2001).

The Social Exchange Theory (Kelley & Thibault, 1978) looks to define the process of persons exchanging resources through a social relationship. This theory can for example explain the interaction between a salesperson and its customer, and how they may modify the resources they use to fit each other's expectations. Furthermore, The Social Exchange Theory is extensively used to explain business relationships (Anderson & Narus, 1984). Relational outcomes in a salesperson and customer relation is said to not be governed by rules. It further assumes that the people involved only take part in the social exchange and relationship if there is an expected reward that covers the costs involved in the social exchange. The reward and costs, however, is not solely economic, but can also relate to the relational costs and reward involved in a relationship between the customer and seller (Lambe, Wittman & Speakman, 2001).

Literature further states that in order for a long-term and positive relationship between a salesperson and customer to exist within the Social Exchange Theory, the most vital variable that needs to be in place is trust (Lambe, Wittman & Speakman, 2001). Trust being vital in B2B relationships is further backed-up by Morgan and Hunt (1994), who have empirically tested that trust has to be in place for a positive relationship and commitment. Commitment and satisfaction are also two vital variables that need to be in place in a successful relational exchange. Commitment is further said to be the most considered variable when defining B2B social exchanges (Wilson, 1995). Lastly, satisfaction is said to play a major role in the

customer-seller relationship within the social exchange theory, as it explains how companies receive benefits from the relationship. The benefits are said to appear when the customer's expectations are met or exceeded, and that if that is the case, the business relationship is likely to be maintained (Lambe, Wittman & Speakman, 2001). Weitz and Bradford (1999) reinforce this statement by stating that satisfaction is a key indicator of the quality of a relationship in a B2B context.

B2B firms can successfully increase business by up to 50% just by developing a relationship with the customer that is based on the seller taking the time to learn the customer's needs. (Stewart, 2005). Furthermore, according to McCue (2007), in order for a sales person to be successful in B2B sales, the sales person must understand elaborate details about the customer and the industry in which they are operating. B2B sales relationships is also said by Donath (2005) to be dependent on the sales person being entirely devoted to the customer and its value proposition. Angel (2003) reinforces this point by stating that the customer organization should sell based on the customer's goal as opposed to follow its own company's agenda (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007). Lynch and de Chernatony (2007) state that successful B2B sales is accomplished through a well-trained salesforce that can communicate the brand value to its customers.

The salespersons are a central part of the relationship building with the customer-organization in the sales process. An effective salesforce is said to be the direct cause for an effective and successful seller-organization (Bauladauf & Cravens, 2002). The importance of the sales force is further reinforced by Piercy, Cravens and Morgan (1999), where they state that seller-organizations typically spend a significantly larger amount on training their salesforce than on other marketing and advertising activities. Parsons (2002) states that the quality of the relationship between the seller and buyer in a B2B context is primarily built by the salesperson, and it is thus vital to train salespersons to show confidence and develop trust to be successful.

2.8 Use of Technology in B2B Sales Relationship Building

Sales technologies are typically adopted to facilitate the forming of the relationship between a customer and a seller (Hunter & Perreault, 2006). As customers become more aware of, and more comfortable with technology, their expectations of information sharing in terms of delivery time increases (Tanner & Shipp, 2005). Technology as mediator between the customer and seller is further claimed to be introduced due to competitive pressure. Research states that companies implement technology solutions for customer-seller relationship building because of pressure from competitive forces, and for companies to gain stakeholder support (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Salanick & Pfeffer, 1978).

A technology that is being used in B2B sales that has changed the way sales persons build relationships with their customers is the Customer Relationship Management tool. This tool combines sales, marketing as well as service information to build these customer-seller relationships (Shoemaker, 2001). B2B sales companies today typically use a Customer Relationship Management tool to collect and update customer information. This tool enables the sales person to better understand its customer and its needs (Angel, 2003). Furthermore, the tool is enables for the seller to learn more about the customer in order to be able to deliver greater value to the customer, making each other more valuable to the other (Peppers & Rogers, 2004). Customer Relationship Management as a tool allows for the seller-organization to process large amounts of information about its customer by recording all touch-points of the customer (Kotler & Keller, 2005). Furthermore, salespersons, as the middleman between a seller company and a customer, has access to and is able to collect information on the market. This enables the salesperson to share relevant information to the customer about market changes, making the salesperson able to aid the customer in implementing the appropriate solutions to stay competitive. The ability to collect and share such information puts the salesperson in a position in which it is able to build a strong relationship with its customer (Day, 1994). Moreover, Kelley (1966) states that to be able to build a strong relationship between a buyer and a seller in a B2B context, there needs to be valuable and trustworthy information exchange.

Angel (2003) implies that the seller organization builds a strong brand name to make it less dependent on specific account managers for the customer organization. This point is reinforced by Lynch and de Chernatorny, 2007, where it is stated that branding is used as a way of reducing the need for a specific account manager for the customer organization. Furthermore, according to Berry (1995); customers develop relationships with the company, and thus builds feelings of trust, social bonding and a sense of obligation to that company, like they might with a specific salesperson. This builds on the point that some companies in the B2B sales environment rely on technology as a replacement for salespeople as it is a cheaper option, taking into account the costs related to training and maintaining human salespeople. The cost of using technology as a replacement is not the low-cost alternative it appears to be however. Using technology as a replacement can especially become a higher cost alternative to hiring, training and compensating salespeople, if the customer experiences problems that are hard to uncover whilst using technological relationship management tools. (Jap, 2001).

2.9 Conclusion of literature

This research paper looks to understand how the B2B sales process has been impacted by the use of technology. Research on B2B sales literature and the use of technology in virtual collaboration and in sales brought forth some interesting variables that can be used as the basis for the creation of a research model. The literature showed that indeed there are two major aspects to successful B2B sales, those being a strong and trust-based relationship between the customer and the seller, and efficient, frequent communication. These have been discovered to be vital for the success of a salesperson by multiple researchers and authors. When these two aspects are looked at along the seven steps of selling that were presented in the literature chapter, one can see that the use of technology in terms of software and video and chat communication has impacted how the sales process is being conducted. The research primarily indicated that technology simplifies the sales process, in that communication is easier and more efficient, and in that software, can be used to collect and analyse data in a way human sales persons cannot.

3. Chapter 3 – Model

The literature chapter looked to gain a better understanding into the B2B sales process, and how literature sees that technology has impacted the sales process over the years. When talking about technology, the primary technologies being referred to are those enabling virtual sales; thus, virtual collaboration tools, as well as software enabling for customer relationship management.

The literature showed that there are two key parts to successful sales in a B2B context, those being communication and relationship to the customer. Communication was discovered to have changed over time in the B2B sales context in terms of the platform for communication; the method in which sellers and customers communicate and in terms of frequency (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). This change can be understood to primarily be based on the transition from field sales to virtual sales, in which technology works as a mediator between customer and seller. Furthermore, the literature showed that with technology as a mediator for communication, one is able to share richer information and have a more detailed and rich conversation (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998); which led to the creation of the variable “quality of information shared.” Moreover, the literature shows that the relationship type between the customer and the seller has transitioned from being transaction-based to now being more of a trusted advisor and partner (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). This change was explained to be due to changing customer expectations, and it would further be interesting to see if it can have been caused by the changes of technology, which enable for a different kind of relationship between customers and sellers’ due to the ability to have a higher frequency of communication and share richer information. Moreover, understanding how technology impacts communication; which can be seen as a short-term change, can give insight into how it changes the B2B sales context in the long run, this being the relationship between customer and seller, under the basis of the theory stating that communication impacts relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The literature also showed that in order to successfully cater to your customers’ needs and have a trusted relationship, one needs to fully understand their needs and current challenges and strengths (Peppers & Rogers, 2004).

The model thus aims to understand better how much of an impact technology has had on the changes in the B2B sales process that have been discovered in the literature chapter.

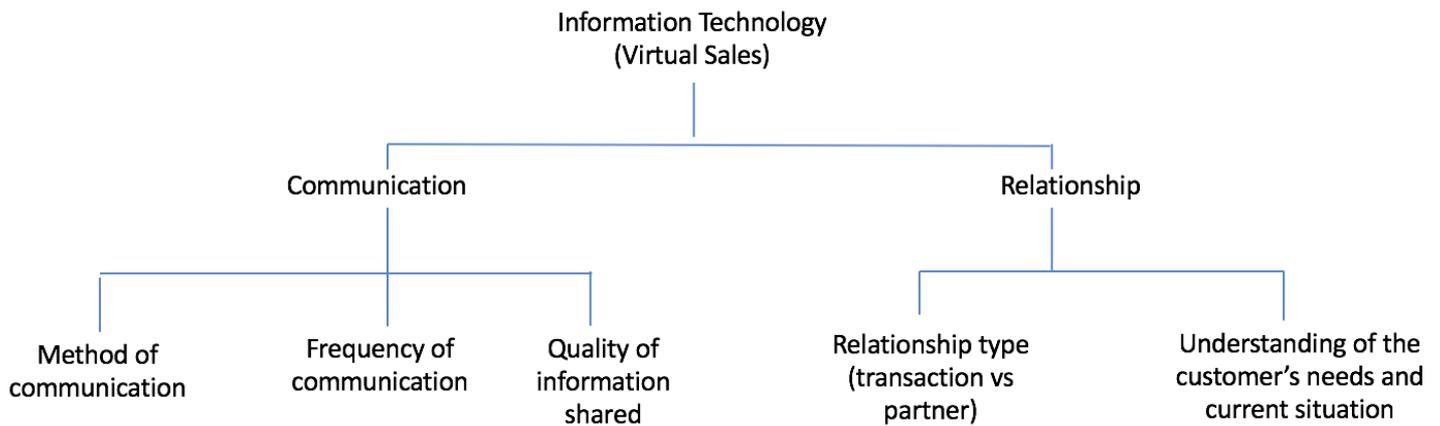


Figure 1 Model

The model shows the variables that will be looked at further in this paper, and have been derived based on the discoveries made in the theory part of the paper. These variables relate to specific aspects of communication and specific aspects to the relationship between seller and buyer in B2B sales. These aspects of communication and relationship-building are those that are expected to have been affected the most by transitioning to virtual sales, and that thus have impacted B2B sales. The variable “IT” relates to how the use of IT is affecting the sales process in terms of the transition from face to face customer-seller meetings to virtual meetings and communication. It further represents how the use of IT has changed, whether the use of IT in B2B sales has increased, and how this has led to the increasing popularity of the virtual sales role.

Research showed that communication between seller and customer has changed over time in B2B sales. Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasize the importance of communication between the two parties, as it is what enables the creation of trust and commitment. In the theory part of the thesis, it is explained that Mohr and Nevin (1990) refer to four aspects of communication in a B2B relationship; frequency, content, direction and modality. The model thus aims to see how communication has changed due to changes in use of IT in the B2B sales process, by looking at three aspects of communication, method, frequency and quality.

Based on the literature that has been presented in chapter two, and the correlation between IT and the different variables, it is expected to discover the following correlation between the use of IT as a mediator and communication:

- *Virtual sales and method of communication:* with the increase in existing technologies for virtual communication and conferencing (Marshall, Byrd, Gardiner, & Rainer (2002), it is expected to discover that the use of IT in the sales process is increasing. It is further expected to uncover that the method of communication in B2B sales has transitioned from a lot of face to face meetings and a large field sales workforce, to a large virtual salesforce because of reasons related to cost cutting, and increasing efficiency (Davenport & Pearlson, pg 54, 1998). It is thus expected to discover that with the increasing use of IT, the choice of communication method between seller and buyer has migrated from face to face and phone communication, to integrated video and voice communication. It is further expected that the method of communication has migrated from pure phone conversations, to communications that integrate voice and video in order to build trust between the customer and seller, and to be able to use all facial cues possible in order to conduct successful conversations.

- *Virtual sales and the frequency of communication:* as communication technologies have become more advanced and more available in the past years, and customers becoming more demanding in terms of fast access to information (Tanner & Shipp, 2005), it is expected to be found that the frequency in communication has increased significantly (Zecher, 1994). This is expected to be found because it has become much cheaper to contact people through technological solution across Wi-Fi than to communicate through face to face interactions which involves travel costs. It is expected to discover that the increase in frequency is also largely based on the fact that the threshold for contacting the buyer or customer is lower than it has previously been, where a meeting would have to be scheduled to make sure both parties could physically be present at the same location at the same time (Daft, 1983). Moreover, a higher frequency in communication is assumed because the coordination of meetings between the buyer organization and the vendor is simpler through virtual communication. The different stakeholders can easily schedule video conferencing meetings from wherever they are, so instead of trying to find a time and place that

works for all persons (Daft, 1983), virtual sales enable the stakeholders to simply choose a time.

- *Virtual sales and the amount and quality of information that can be shared in the sales process:* Because it is expected to be found that communication frequency has increased, it is further natural to expect that the amount of information shared between buyer and seller has increased as well, and the type of information shared has changed due to technological advances (Zecher, 1994; Townsend, DeMarie & Hendrikson, 1998). Furthermore, changes in technology has made it possible to share screens for technological solution demonstrations possible, which is a form of information sharing that was not possible before, and this required the customer and seller to arrange a meeting to do a demonstration, or simply foregoing that at all. Moreover, technological changes in communication has made it possible to contact the buyer or customer in a more flexible manner, from whatever part of the world, at whatever time. This creates the basis for the assumption that the buyer and seller are more inclined to take contact immediately to get answer to questions, or for more additional information. This would ultimately lead to the customer having more information on a solution than if all the information was gathered from independent face-to-face meetings. It is further expected to discover that quality of information shared has improved with changes in technology because of the ability to gather and analyse data more efficiently through CRM tools, which would lead to the information being shared with a customer being more tailored and specific to the customer's needs (Peppers & Rogers, 2004).

Based on the B2B sales overview in chapter 2, the B2B sales process has changed from having a transactional to a relationship-based focus (Cannon & Perrault, 1999). Relationships between customer and seller is said to be vital in B2B sales, and that a strong relationship needs to be in place for a salesperson to be successful (Stewart, 2005). Based on the theory, it would thus be interesting to test whether the relationship between the salesperson and the customer truly has changed or evolved in practice from being transactional-based to moving towards acting as a trusted advisor or partner. Furthermore, with improvements in technology, there are more tools and software available for salespersons to understand their customer and to form a relationship with them (Hunter &

Perreault, 2006). The interviews, based on the discoveries made in the literature chapter in terms of relationship, will thus look to test whether there truly has been changes in the way the relationship between the customer and seller is being formed, on the basis that the seller has more understanding of the needs and current situation of the customer, thanks to big data and data analysis tools.

Based on theories and papers on the topic, it appears as though the relationship between customer and seller has changed in the B2B sales processes because of the increasing use of IT and changes in customer expectations because of the benefits that IT can bring. These changes in the B2B industry is said to have changed the relationship from transaction-focused relationships, to salespersons becoming a trusted advisor and a long-term partner (Mohr & Nevin, 1990), always available to help with any problems that may arise. Furthermore, the relationship between customer and seller has been affected by technology through the information the seller is able to collect on its customer (Kenworthy, 2001).

- *Virtual sales and the type of relationship between buyer and seller:* Based on the theories presented previously in this paper, the B2B sales environment has changed in terms of the customer-seller relationship. Previously, this relationship was more transactional, however this is claimed to have changed to a more consultative and “trusted-advisor” type of relationship (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Furthermore, IT may have played a role in this change of relationship between buyer and seller because of the greater flexibility for two-way communication (Workman, 2006), in which customers easily can contact its account manager in the seller organization through advanced collaboration solutions. Moreover, because technical solutions in the IT B2B industry have become more complex, the sales cycle is longer than it previously has been (Martin, 2013), which would entail more communication between the seller and buyer. It is therefore expected that the interviews that will be conducted will support this view. Furthermore, it is expected to discover that the relationship in virtual sales is even more “partner” focused than pure field sales, because of the higher frequency of communication in virtual sales (Zecher, 1994), and the easier ability to follow up and check up on the customer.

- *Virtual sales and the seller's understanding of the customer:* The understanding the seller has on its customer's challenges and current situation helps the seller build a strong relationship to its customer (Shoemaker, 2001; Angel 2003; peppers & Rogers, 2004). Technological changes have enabled sellers to find more information on their customers in a faster manner, through customer relationship management software and search engines. This is expected to have changed the way leads are built, making it a faster process without needing referrals, for example. Furthermore, these tools, such as Salesforce or CRM tools enable the seller to have a better, 360-degree view and understanding of its customer's needs (Kotler & Keller, 2005), which enables the seller to better communicate with its customer, and thus build a stronger, more valuable relationship. Another way in which IT is expected to have changed the information sellers have on their customer is through the data that can be collected and discovered through these search engines, which can allow for more tailored initial approach meetings with customers. Furthermore, the seller will have more insight into the industry trends and the specific issues customers have, and can thus tailor conversations with its customers to fit the customer's requirements more specifically. Technology changes or the increasing use of technology are also expected to have changed the seller's understanding of the customer by enabling the seller to have a good overview of what products, software and services the customer has purchased in the past, and how much these are being used. This can enable the seller to contact the customer to ensure the customer knows the full value of the solution they have purchased, and help the customer extract that value. This knowledge can enable the seller to build a stronger and more trusted relationship with their customer.

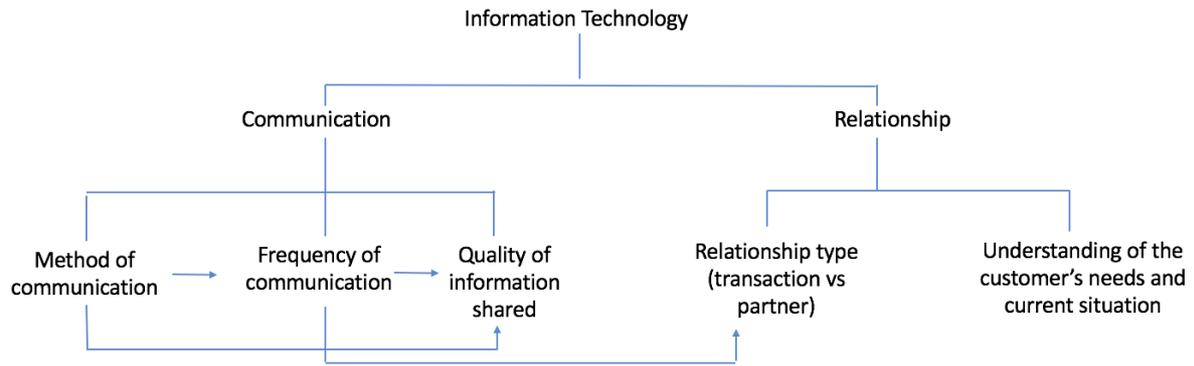


Figure 2 Relationship Between Variables

Based on the model created, there are some connections that can be assumed in terms of the variables that are expected to have been impacted by the use of IT in B2B sales, these can be seen in Figure 2. Within the communication side of the model, one can assume that because the method of communication has changed over the years from more face to face based meetings, to more virtual meetings, that the frequency of communication would be a direct result of that. Because meetings can be conducted virtually, it seems natural that scheduling virtual meetings would be easier, and thus the frequency of meetings could increase, as opposed to field sales, where all parties need to be available at the same time, and travel time needs to be accounted for. As for quality of information shared, though more insight will be uncovered during the interviews, it can also be assumed that because the frequency of communication goes up, the quality of information shared may increase, as there are more possibilities for answering all questions a customer may have, whenever these questions may arise. Moreover, method of communication can also be assumed to impact quality of information shared, based on existing research stating that virtual communication allows for richer communication, due to the ability to share graphs and screens (Townsend, DeMarie & Hendrickson, 1998; Zecher, 1994).

When looking at the relationship side, it can be assumed that the type of relationship, from transaction-based to partner-based, has changed because of the higher frequency of communication. With low frequency of communication, it can be assumed that the seller and customer meet to close deals, and that once a deal is closed, the customer and seller will lose touch until a new opportunity arises. With a high frequency of communication because of a

lower threshold for contacting the customer or seller virtually, it can be assumed that the relationship becomes more partner-based, as the two parties continuously communicate to share information.

4. Chapter 4 - Case Description

4.1 Company Presentation: Cisco Systems, Inc. Overview

Cisco Systems, Inc. is an American multinational technology company. It was established in 1984 by two Stanford University computer scientists, husband and wife Len Bosack and Sandy Lerner. Cisco pioneered the concept of the local area network (LAN) and is thus often said to have created the internet (Cisco, 2017).

Today, Cisco is the worldwide leader in IT and helps companies seize opportunities to “change the way we work, live, play and learn.” The company’s mission statement is to “shape the future of the Internet by creating unprecedented value and opportunity for our customers, employees, investors, and ecosystem partners.” (Cisco, 2017). Cisco designs and sells various products and services and delivers integrated solutions to develop and connect networks around the world (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 1). These integrated solutions include network, data centres, cloud, security, collaboration, analytics and Internet of Things to optimize efficiency and reduce business risks (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 1)

The multinational technology company can today be found all over the world. Cisco has numerous offices around North America, Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Their sales and marketing department had by the end of the 2016 fiscal year approximately 25.500 employees including managers, sales representatives and technical support personnel. Furthermore, the company has field sales offices in 95 countries from where the company sells products and services to business customers both virtually and in field sales (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 9)

Cisco’s customers include enterprise businesses, commercial businesses and organizations, service providers and the public sector. The customers are not limited to any geographical location, industry, or market segment. (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 9)

4.2 Collaboration Solutions

Cisco's collaboration portfolio combines voice, video, data and mobile applications on mobile and fixed networks across a wide range of devices. The company works to create innovative collaboration technology through the use of hardware, software and the network with delivery in the cloud. (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 6).

The different virtual collaboration tools that this paper will focus on will now be described. This is to give the reader a deeper understanding of the functionalities of the collaboration tool.

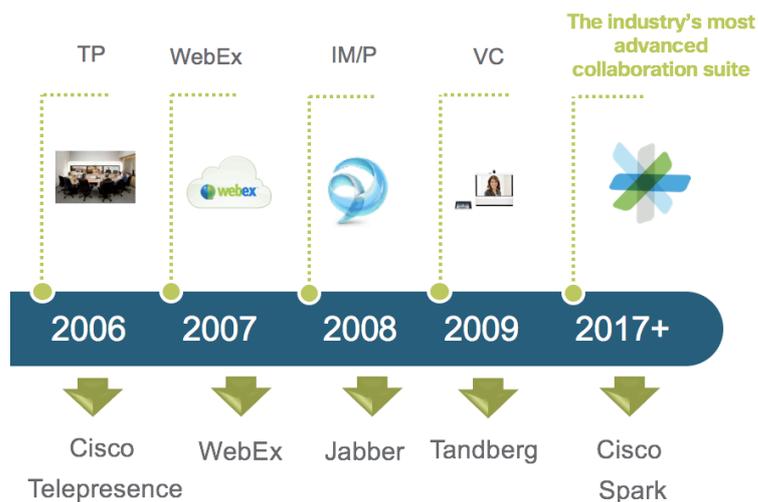


Figure 3 Cisco Collaboration Solutions (Lopez, 2017)

Cisco Spark is a cloud-based communication application that can be downloaded onto any device. It was released in 2017. It is a platform for messaging, meeting and calling from the cloud, which facilitates information sharing between people in different locations (Cisco Annual report 2016 p: 6). Cisco Spark can bring together physical and virtual teams through video and audio, and allow for meetings, training and other work-related activities regardless of location or device. It can further be integrated with a Spark Board, allowing for video

conferencing over the app or through the digital white board, on which participants in the call can white board, annotate pictures or files, and share files and documents. (Collaboration Products and Services, 2017)

Jabber is an instant messaging application which was launched in 2008. It enables users to conduct instant messaging, voice and video calls, voice messaging desktop sharing and conferencing. (Collaboration Products and Services, 2017)

WebEx is a video conferencing solution similar to its competitor Skype. WebEx is a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face meetings that can be used for video conferences for up to 1,025 participants. These participants can be located anywhere as long as there is an internet connection. The platform also allows for screen sharing, recording, and instant messaging. (Collaboration Products and Services, 2017)

TelePresence is a conference kit that brings together teams, customers, and partners to make collaboration more lifelike. It enables people build relationships and trust through video and audio communication without the need for face-to-face contact. The TelePresence kit includes a large screen which includes high-quality audio and high-quality images. When several people are in a meeting in the same room using a TelePresence, the camera will zoom in on the person speaking. This makes it easier to see who is speaking, and to see their facial cues. (Collaboration Products and Services, 2017)

These collaboration solutions can be used to improve productivity, accelerate business processes through faster sharing of business-critical information and build relationships through a lifelike video experience.

4.3 Cisco's Salesforce – Virtual Sales Account Managers and Field Sales Account Managers

In this section, Cisco's salesforce will be explained in terms of the two different types of account managers, and who they report to. This is to show who the two types of account managers communicate with in terms of their customer and manager's physical location. This is to give more insight into the sales persons use of virtual collaboration tools in day to day business activities. The information in this section is based on my knowledge of the structure and operations of this company, as an employee.

Cisco divides its salesforce into several categories based on specialization in products and the type of customer. As mentioned previously, this paper will solely focus on field sales account managers as well as virtual sales account managers.

Cisco's Virtual Sales Account Managers sales force for the Nordics can be found in different geographical areas. The Norwegian Virtual Sales Account Managers work with Norwegian customers, but are located at the Cisco office in Copenhagen. In Copenhagen, one can also find the Danish Virtual Sales Account Managers who work with Danish companies. The Swedish Virtual Sales Account Managers are located in Sweden and work with Swedish companies.

The Norwegian and Danish Virtual Sales Account Managers located in Copenhagen have a manager that they report to; the Global Virtual Sales Manager. The Global Virtual Sales Manager in Copenhagen is responsible for ensuring that the Virtual Sales Account Managers who work towards the Norwegian and Danish are meeting their financial targets.

The Field Sales Account Managers on the other hand are always located in the home country, as they physically go out into the fields to visit their customers. The Field Sales Account Managers report directly to a manager who is responsible for the specific vertical in which the field sales account manager works for. This manager is one level above the global virtual sales account manager, and is not always located in the same geographical location or office as the global virtual sales account manager. Despite physically being located in the

same geographical location as its customers, Field Sales Account Managers are known to use virtual collaboration tools actively in order to reduce travel costs.

Virtual Sales Account Managers and Field Sales Account Managers are put into teams related to the vertical they are targeting in their home country. These verticals are enterprise, public and commercial. Enterprise relates to the companies that are Cisco's largest customers in terms of revenue. The public team includes virtual and field account managers who target the military, local and central government, municipalities, health and education. Lastly, the commercial team is responsible for all small to medium companies in their home country.

The Virtual Sales Account Managers who work for Norway are thus working for the Norwegian market, with Norwegian customers, but from Denmark. They report to the global virtual sales manager that is located in the same office, but their manager is also the head of their vertical, which is located in Norway. Because the account manager and its own managers and customers are located in different geographical locations, virtual collaboration tools are used on a day to day basis for sales persons both external with customers, but also internally with colleagues and managers.

5. Chapter 5- Methodology

This chapter will explain the choice of methodology to discover whether the expected correlations between the variables presented in chapter 3 are valid. It includes the research design and approach, as well as how data collection was planned and executed, and the potential treats to validity and reliability of the data. The methodology is chosen on the basis of the research question. This chapter will end by explaining some of the potential limitations to the approach taken in the paper, as well as reflections on the method.

5.1 Thesis Objective

This thesis aims to contribute to the literature on B2B sales by investigating how IT has impacted this sales process, by using Cisco as the case being explored. Based on the literature and research, the thesis specifically looks at how IT has affected the B2B sales process in terms of the communication between the seller and customer, as well as the relationship between the customer and seller. This paper is built on previous research on B2B sales and how technology affects communication and relationship building. The paper aims to raise interest in the field, as there are few research papers published on how the B2B sales process has been affected by technology changes, or how it has been affected by the increasing importance of the virtual sales role. There are however several research articles that explore the effectiveness and performance of virtual teams, though research on the customer-seller relationship and communication is little explored. Research papers on how virtual teams work through virtual communication tools can still be valuable in this case, as it gives insight into some of the typical challenges and benefits related to working with someone virtually. B2B sales generates much value to the economy and plays a big role in how end-customers live their daily lives. It is thus a valuable topic to look into, and the results can be used to discover how B2B companies can use IT to their advantage in the sales process to maximize value creation. It can further be used to understand how sellers can offer their customers the best services possible in the sales cycle.

5.2 Purpose of The Research Paper:

The purpose of a research paper can be divided into three categories; exploratory, descriptive and explanatory (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). It is vital to categorise the purpose of the research paper in order to choose the right design.

Exploratory research is a big part of marketing and business strategy, as it focuses on discovering ideas and insights, instead of aiming to collect statistically accurate data. It is often used to understand and defining areas for growth, company issues, and alternative courses of actions for companies. This research paper aims at discovering how IT has impacted B2B sales in the context of Cisco. This paper can therefore be considered an exploratory one, as it looks to discover the effect of technology on the relationship and communication between customer and seller in a B2B company. Using exploratory research further enables the ability to properly understand and interpret the participant's experience (Patton, 2002).

5.3 Research, Design and Approach

Research design is a general plan that concerns how the research question will be answered and entails the purpose, approach and methods for data collection (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). The choice of methodology plays a significant role in the results attained, and thus the right choice of methodology is important for the reliability and validity of the paper.

A research paper's approach can be inductive, deductive, or abductive (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). An inductive approach is usually used when there is little existing research on the phenomenon. It involves going from a specific phenomenon, to a general one. It entails developing theory as a result of observation from empirical data and discovered patterns. This is typically combined with a qualitative data to allow for depth in the understanding of the context of the phenomenon. Qualitative data allows for this by enabling the researcher to clarify meanings and understand why a phenomenon is the way it is; by giving the opportunity to get first hand understandings of the participant's experiences

(Maxwell, 2013).

On the other hand, a deductive approach is typically used when there is a significant amount of existing research on the topic and it entails going from theory to empiricism. Data is thus collected and analysed to test if theoretical approaches correlate to real-life situations and phenomenon. This is a more structured approach compared to the inductive one, where researchers have to be flexible and go in the direction the data leads them. Deductive approaches are typically associated with quantitative data. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007)

Both approaches have their weaknesses. The inductive approach entails using qualitative data and unrealistically expects the researcher to be able to collect all relevant information connected to the phenomenon. This can lead to information overload and difficulties sorting through the data that has been collected. The process of analysing the collected data is this a very time-consuming process.

Inductive approaches on the other hand are known for simplifying the complex. Furthermore, inductive approaches are limited, all it takes is one observation to not be the same as the other observations for the conclusion to lose its validity. On the same note, the observations can be incorrect or incomplete, which also reduces the strength of the conclusion that is derived if further observation was not conducted.

This research paper takes an inductive approach. This is on the basis that qualitative data collection and analysis is necessary to be able to fully understand how participants have experienced how IT has affected the sales process in a B2B context. A qualitative approach will further help build a “rich description” of a complex environment that has been little explored in literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

5.4 Data Collection

The research question seeks to discover how IT has impacted B2B sales, using Cisco's salesforce as case study. This implies needing to dig deep to understand in what phases of the sales cycle IT has caused disruption, and what these changes that IT brought were. There is also a need to understand the concrete effects of the changes caused by IT in the sales process, both the negatives and the positives in terms of the relationship and communication aspect of the sales process. It is further important to discover why the technology is being used in the different parts of the sales cycle, and for what reason these technologies are being used.

Conducting interviews with the subjects would thus lead to more thorough information collected on their perception on how IT has impacted their role as salespersons in a B2B context. It will allow to ask follow up questions to truly come to the root of how IT impacts the sales process, and the most significant effects it has caused. Using qualitative data in an inductive approach will thus allow for more probing on the effects IT has had on the sales role of the subjects, and will offer the possibility to collect rich and detailed information.

The data used to answer the research question is primary data. The primary data was gathered through a qualitative approach. More specifically, the interviews were non-standardised and were conducted in a one-to-one set-up. Furthermore, actions were taken to guarantee all interviews were be conducted face-to-face, in order to reduce risks of unreliability by having a different mode of interview. Having solely one type of interview ensures that there is more reliability in the interview process and in the results gathered.

5.4.1 Research Design

The interview process took the form of a semi-structured interview. This entails having specific questions that directly relate to the theories and literature, but still giving the opportunity and flexibility to probe for additional information. This may not have been possible if a strict interview guide had been followed. (Ringdal, 2001).

5.4.2 Research Participants

When choosing the research participants, I looked for Cisco sales employees within my own network who had worked for Cisco in a sales role between 3 and 10 years. Ensuring that these sales persons have worked in sales for at least 6 years allows us to get insight into how they have experienced the change in use of technology throughout these years. Furthermore, the reason for not choosing a higher amount of years in a sales role is primarily based on the fact that employees who have worked in this role for over 10 years are now more senior. This implies that they may not be utilizing technology to the fullest, as they may prefer using the traditional sales tools. This assumption is based on my own opinions based on the time I have worked for the company, and not published research. The minimum of 3 years was chosen in order to ensure the participant had some sales experience and has had the time to experience both types of sales roles.

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Years in field sales role	4	4	2	7	1
Years in virtual sales role	2	3	4	3	2
Total amount of years in sales with Cisco	6	7	6	10	3

Table 1 Overview of Interview Subjects

All the subjects that were interviewed are a part of the Cisco salesforce in the north. All five subjects that were interviewed were account managers for Cisco's salesforce who had experienced some years in field sales, and some years in a virtual sales role. Interviewing sales people who have had the two type of sales roles allows for collecting insight on how IT has changed their sales role. This is primarily because in a field sales role, virtual communication tools aren't used as frequently, whereas virtual sales typically is 100% virtual and thus 100% technology based. The field sales role can be looked at like the "traditional" sales role, as it was before the use of technology became more prominent. Interviewing employees who have worked in both roles gave insight into how they perceive technology to affect the sales cycle in both types of sales role.

5.4.3 Data Collection

The data was collected in an exploratory qualitative manner through the use of interviews. The interviews were conducted at the Cisco Sweden office in October and November 2017 in different meeting rooms.

In order to make sure the interview questions were valid and structured, as well as consistent throughout the five interviews, a protocol was developed as a researcher tool and guide. The interview protocol was tested with one colleague who has worked with Cisco in both sales roles, this colleague was not included in the participant pool. An adjustment that was made as a result of the interview pilot with my colleague was the removal and rephrasing of questions with too many components, that were difficult to answer in a detailed manner. The order of the questions was also changed in order to allow for a more natural flow in the conversation for the real interviews. The final semi-structured qualitative interviews (Appendix A) were then conducted with the five participants, with some interview questions added during the interview in order to dig deeper into answers and get a better insight into their experience (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, and were all conducted face to face. The interviews were conducted in 5 phases; 1) introduction and general background, 2) focus on field sales, 3) focus on virtual sales, 4) perceptions, and finally, 5) closing.

The introduction and general background phase explained the background for the interview as well as served the purpose of collecting information from the participant. The introduction included a brief explanation of the topic of the thesis, as well as an assurance of confidentiality. Confidentiality was promised to ensure the participants felt comfortable in sharing their true opinions, without fear of their managers being informed of any sensitive information. Furthermore, this first phase was used to collect information on the participant, specifically how many years they have worked in Cisco, and how many years in each sales role.

Phase two; field sales, related to digging deeper into how they experienced this role, how they communicated with customers, how they built relationships with their customer, and their general perception as to how efficient and successful they were in this role. Phase three was conducted very similarly to phase two, and included the same questions, though with a focus on the virtual aspect of their role. Section four the participants were asked to explain how they would compare their two roles in terms of the sales process, and the communication and relationship with their customers. They were further asked to share insight into specific situations in which one of the roles was more beneficial to a deal, and what parts of each role had the largest value. Lastly, the closing phase allowed the participants to share any additional information they thought of during the interview.

A digital audio recorder was used, with permission, throughout all five interviews. Using a digital audio recorder enabled me to focus on the answers I was given in order to be able to react accordingly and ask the correct follow up questions. Not using an audio recorder may have led to being more focused on preparing the next question to ask, and thus not being able to fully focus and process on the answers being given. Transcribing the interviews allowed for the ability to relive the answers, and thus refreshing the answers I was given. This enables for processing the answers with more contextual understanding (Ringdal, 2001)

The questions included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, though primarily open-ended questions in order to get the subject to open up and describe the situation. Open questions were for example “How would you describe the communication between you and your customers in field sales?” This question is open enough for the respondent to give any example they may choose, and gives opportunities for further probing based on the variables that come up in their answer.

5.5 Analysis

The analysis of the data collected entailed using pattern matching, an analytic technique where one can observe patterns from each interview that had been conducted, and comparing them to the patterns predicted in the literature (Yin, 2003). This allows for identifying differences and similarities between existing literature and what the situation appears to be like today in Cisco. The data analysis phase focused on discovering trends and themes from

the data collected.

The data analysis phase started off with listening to the recordings and transcribing them. As previously mentioned, this was to get a better contextual understanding of the answers given, and to be able to start looking for trends and patterns. While transcribing the interviews, I used colours, text formats such as bold, italics and underlined, and different fonts; all as ways to categorize and highlight interesting observations. I also used the comment function on Microsoft Word to make note of any significant information I would want to share in the thesis.

I used three approaches to analyse the interview data that had been collected; transcribing, categorization using codes and colours, and connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013). By using Maxwell's (2013) categorization process, I used two types of groupings. The first was "boxes" to put the data in order as a form of grouping it. I also used substantive grouping; which entails describing the participant's beliefs. Using these categories, I further developed subcategories inductively and deductively, in order to allow recurring themes to stand out.

Furthermore, I used a coding system (Appendix B) to identify themes for virtual and field sales. The coding system was created to make the information collected manageable. The coding system was developed deductively and inductively, based on findings in existing literature.

All the five interviews were compared to one another to identify any major themes that come up in all interviews. I first compared the perceptions and experiences of each respondent in the field sales role. Then, I compared the participants' perceptions and experiences in virtual sales. Thereafter, I looked at similarities and differences in their answers in the fourth part of the interview, in which they compare their perception and experiences in field and virtual sales in order to see what role technology plays in the sales process.

After comparing all the respondents' answers in the three main parts of the interviews (field sales, virtual sales, comparison), I compared the five respondents' answers related to their

perception and experiences with a focus on the communication in field and virtual sales. Then, I compared the five interviews to one another with a focus on the relationship between the customer and the seller.

The analysis and the coding of the data was done after all interviews were conducted, in order to not start leaning in a certain direction based on observations made from previous interviews.

5.6 Limitations and Threats to Validity

Validity relates to whether the research actually focuses on what the research question is trying to answer. Maxwell (2013, p. 122) states that validity in a qualitative research paper is the ability to have a correct and credible description, interpretation and conclusion. In this case, validity would entail the research being relevant to discovering how IT has impacted B2B sales. In order to have validity, the literature used has to be focused enough on the aspects of B2B sales to be able to draw a conclusion as to how B2B sales has been conducted before, and how the use of IT has affected the sales process. By using literature that refers to the importance of communication and relationship building in B2B sales, and how this drives the process, we can then look at how IT has changed these two aspects of the process. This would thus allow for the drawing of a conclusion on how B2B sales has changed, in terms of communication and relationships between seller and buyer. This could be considered as a strength in the research, as the literature supports the fact that communication and relationship building is vital in B2B sales today, and literature further supports the assumption that IT has affected these two aspects of sales.

Threats to validity can be described as events or processes that occur during the course of a research study which can lead to conclusions that are invalid (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Three threats to validity and limitations can be identified in this thesis. These are researcher bias, influence of researcher and the size of the participant sample.

According to Maxwell (2013), it is impossible not to have any researcher bias, and it is thus vital that they are considered and addressed. Researcher bias is a threat to the validity of this thesis as I was the sole collector and analyser of the data. Furthermore, as a fellow employee

in a sales role at Cisco, the chances of bias increase. Because of my role at Cisco, it is natural that I have prior theories, beliefs and perceptions to the study I have been conducting. It is further important to note that I conducted all the interviews face to face, as opposed to using virtual collaboration tools. This may imply the participants got a feeling that face to face communication was perceived as better or more practical, which may have affected their answers in the interviews conducted.

In order to address this bias, I attempted to follow a structured, pre-created semi-structured systematic process for the interviews and the analysis of data. I did not however find a way of overcoming the potential issues surrounding the conducting of interviews in a face to face manner.

As for researcher influence, Maxwell (2013) states that influence of the researcher on the qualitative research is common, as the researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon that is being studied. As with the researcher bias, this is claimed to be virtually impossible to eliminate, though following the interview guide and staying alert and aware of questions as to not lead the participant can be used as measures to mitigate the effects. In order to not lead the questions in a specific direction, I would attempt to instead as them to elaborate by asking, for example; “could you share an example of this?” or “could you elaborate on that?”

Lastly, the number of participants in the study can be considered a threat and limitation to validity. The number was kept at five as these were the participants that were physically present at the office, and for reasons related to time to complete the research. However, since the study is focused solely on Cisco sales representatives in the north who have experience in field and virtual sales with Cisco, five may perhaps be representative amount. Despite this, I am in no position to make an assumption as to whether this number is representative, and so this poses a threat to the validity of the research.

5.7 Chapter Summary

The methodology chapter describes the research methodology. It describes the exploratory and qualitative research approach that was used to conduct the research to discover how IT has impacted B2B sales in terms of communication as well as relationship building. This chapter describes the process of gathering and analysing data collected from five interviews of sales persons from Cisco who have experienced both a virtual and a field sales role with the company. The data was collected in a semi-structured qualitative interview, and was also recorded with permission, and later transcribed and grouped to analyse.

6. Chapter 6 - Results

This thesis' aim was to discover how IT has impacted the B2B sales process in the context of the world's leading IT company; Cisco. Furthermore, the study attempted to do this by mainly focusing on two aspects of the B2B sales process; communication and relationship building. This is because research shows that IT has changed the way communication is conducted. Theory further showed that the way in which relationships are built have changed, due to changes in the understanding the seller can have on his customer. Furthermore, research shows that communication and relationship building are two major parts of the B2B sales process, and communication plays a part in relationship building. The research thus focused on how communication and relationship building has become impacted by technological tools by looking at what tools are being used in the sales process, how they are being used, and what the benefits and weaknesses related to that are.

The thesis has an exploratory, qualitative-driven approach, and made use of literature on communication and customer-seller relationships to get insight into what parts of the B2B sales process this study should focus on. The research conducted took form in interviews with 5 of Cisco's salespersons. All salespersons had worked for Cisco in a sales role between 6 and 10 years, and had experienced both field and virtual sales.

6.1 Emerging Themes

The analysis phase entailed comparing the responses of the respondents that were interviewed. Furthermore, comparisons were made between each respondent's answer on how field and virtual sales is conducted. Comparisons were also made across the theme of communication and relationship separately. Whilst comparing, I looked for similarities and differences in their perception of the sales process in virtual and in field sales by focusing on what role IT plays in this difference. While looking for trends and patterns, and using a thematic approach for the analysis; 4 main categories were set up which are presented in figure 5: 1) communication, 2) communication technology, 3) relationship management technology, 4) relationship building. These categories can be considered as the areas in which IT plays the primary role in the B2B sales process, and the areas in which there are the most differences between field and virtual sales.

Category	What	How	Recurring themes
Communication	Any kind of communication between the seller and customer	Written, verbal, F2F, with technology as a mediator	- Efficiency
			- Frequency
			- Information sharing
Communication technology	The technology tools used in communication	Through voice or voice + video	- Video conferencing
			- Instant Messaging
			- Demos
Relationship management technology	Technology used to collect and analyse customer data	Through software which can generate reports	- Salesforce
Relationship building	How the customer and salesperson get to know one another to build trust	Through communication and relationship management technology	- Trusted advisor /partner
			- Engagement
			- Frequent communication

Table 2 Categories and Themes

6.2 Findings Related to Communication

6.2.1 Finding One: Communication – Frequency, Efficiency, Information Sharing

Frequency

Throughout the interviews, all five respondents stated that they would communicate with their customers more often when in a virtual sales role than in a field sales role because of the facilitating effect of virtual communication tool. When asked to compare the frequency of communication between the seller and its customers in both types of sales roles, one respondent said the following:

As a VSAM (Virtual sales account manager) I talked a lot more with my customers than I do right now in field sales cos in inside sales, we have no choice but to talk through collaboration tools, so my customers feel a lot more comfortable scheduling video calls several times a week or month for a chat. (Respondent 1)

When asked to elaborate more on the frequency of communication in field sales, the same respondent said the following:

Now (in field sales) I typically just call my customers, or sometimes schedule WebEx meetings. But first and foremost, I try to meet them for a face-to-face meeting for pitches or solution proposals. I probably only talk to each of those customers a few times a month only, when I need more information for a pitch. I've started using WebEx more though, to be able to work with more of my customers. (Respondent 1)

In virtual sales, all five respondents mentioned the threshold for contacting their customers as being lower, as the customer is “used to getting a phone call and setting up a WebEx meeting” (respondent 2) for catching up on how things are going. One respondent stated that in virtual sales, the customer knows the account manager responsible for that company is virtual, and so “scheduling meetings virtually is easier” (respondent 4). Technology as a facilitator for contacting customers and facilitating finding suitable times was mentioned by all five respondents.

Two respondents, respondents 1 and 4, explicitly said that their customers in field sales prefer talking on the phone for catching up, but that when scheduling face-to-face meetings for solution presentations, finding suitable times for the different stakeholders in the customer organization and the account manager could be a challenge. Both these respondents further said that this often led to fewer meetings than he would have liked;

“If I did not have the possibility to use Spark or WebEx to talk to my customers, I would probably never close a deal. I can't possibly only communicate with my customers in face-to-face situations. I had much better relations with my customers as a VSAM though, cos we

would talk more often. In field, the communication and relation is more formal, so we talk less frequently, but for longer, and with a specific purpose for the meeting.” (Respondent 4)

Efficiency

As for communication frequency, all five respondents agreed that with technology as a mediator, there was much greater efficiency in communication between customer and seller. The primary reason that was discovered in the interviews was that by removing the time it takes to travel to customers; the salesperson could talk to a lot more customers in a day;

“I mean, I love travelling down to my customers’ offices and having a chat, and seeing how things are going; but I just don’t have the time. I have 78 customers around the country, and I need to meet my quota, so I can’t spend a full day travelling back and forth for one meeting, when I can follow up with at least 4 customers in that time over the phone, it’s just not efficient” (Respondent 3)

“If it’s just a follow-up meeting I just use WebEx, so that I don’t waste time driving to the customer. If it’s a big deal, or the customer asked for a concrete proposal to a solution I’ll go to their office. But I can’t always drive to my customers to meet them in the field, it’s not an efficient or smart way of doing business. Our customers all use WebEx and are happy with it”. (Respondent 5)

All five respondents mentioned that because they could communicate with their customers from the office through virtual collaboration solutions, it was easier for them to make their quota, because they could communicate with more customers during the work day. One respondent specifically said that in field sales he makes fewer but bigger deals, whereas in virtual sales he would be able to cater to many more customers in the same amount of time.

Respondent 4 mentioned field sales to be an “*inefficient*” use of time, as he sees his colleagues spending hours a week on the road to visit customers, whilst he can conduct

meetings of the same quality from the office, thus reaching out and keeping in touch with more people than his colleagues do. The same respondent said that because he could conduct virtual meetings with customers more “*flexibly*” he was able to shorten the time it takes him to close deals.

Information sharing

Information sharing is something that came up in all five interviews. None of the five respondents made any claims suggesting that sharing of information between customer and seller is easier in one of the two types of sales roles. In both sales roles, four respondents (2, 3, 4, 5) mentioned using whiteboards to present concrete technical solutions to their customer. The four stated that in field and virtual sales, they would use whiteboards the same way, the only difference would be whether the customer was sitting in the same room or not.

In field and virtual sales alike, all five respondents stated using PowerPoints actively to present potential solutions;

“WebEx makes it easy to share screens and show PowerPoints whilst pitching to a customer, the only difference is that in field I’ll stand in front of the sharp-board whilst showing the PowerPoint, but in WebEx I’ll just show my customers the PowerPoint from my seat.”
(Respondent 4)

Two of the five respondents (1, 4) did say that in virtual sales, they could easily pull up relevant information to answer a customer’s questions, and share that document during the meeting when necessary. They did not however compare this to field sales. One of those two respondents (4) did however mention that if it hadn’t been possible to share screens on WebEx, she would not have been able to share information as efficiently with her customers.

Four of the five respondents (respondents 1, 2, 4, 5) mentioned the benefit of using WebEx or TelePresence in the virtual sales roles when pitching solutions in relation to

demonstrations of solutions. These four respondents stated that in virtual sales, demonstrations were easy to set up, and could be done “*spontaneously,*” (respondent 2) so in response to a customer asking for one. Two of those respondents (respondents 2 and 5) elaborated and stated that in their VSAM role, they could easily and in a non-planned manner add an engineer to the call, who would conduct the demonstration of the solution to the customer over WebEx or TelePresence. The fifth respondent, however, stated that in field sales, demonstrations were typically planned weeks in advance to ensure that the engineer, account manager and customer all were available for a demo, but that virtual demos were impractical because of unpredictable technology.

To summarize these findings of communication in terms of frequency, efficiency and information sharing, technology appears to play a major role in simplifying this process for the salespersons at Cisco. All five respondents believe that the threshold for contacting customers is lower in virtual sales, as technological communication methods simplifies the process of communication. The issues related to scheduling meetings with customers face to face was brought up, and that because of this, communication through virtual methods led to a higher frequency of communication and meetings. Furthermore, all five respondents see technology as a mediator in communication which enables for more efficiency, by allowing the sales process to be conducted as normal, though through video and voice conferencing without spending time travelling to and from customers. Lastly, results for information sharing didn't bring forth much comparison between the difference in the process with or without technology as mediator. However, one aspect of information sharing that was easier with technology as a mediator is the ability to spontaneously add a sales specialist or engineer to a customer call, something which would be much harder to do in a face to face meeting.

6.2.2 Finding Two: Communication Technology

Video conferencing

Video conferencing is the primary form of communication between the customer and sellers in virtual sales. All five respondents stated that in their virtual sales role, they used video

conferencing, such as WebEx or Spark, every day. The respondents who started their field sales roles in the past year all stated that when Spark was launched in 2017, their use of virtual communication increased;

“I’m not a huge fan of WebEx, and when I started my field sales role I pretty much stopped using it for communicating with my customers. When Spark came out this year though, I sold the solution to some customers, which enabled us to communicate through Spark. It really facilitates the communication, because we can share files and annotate documents on the Spark board with potential solutions whilst doing the virtual meeting.” (Respondent 3)

All five respondents also mentioned using the virtual conferencing capabilities in their field sales roles, but not as a normal form of communication. The respondents stated typically using video conferencing with customers when an engineer or sales specialist located in another country had to join in on meetings.

Instant Messaging

Instant messaging primarily came up as a tool that aids the salespersons with communicating with one another and with other employees within the company, in order to gather information quickly for sales meetings. All five respondents stated using Jabber and Spark as a platform for asking questions to engineers, product specialists, or other colleagues, to get answers quickly;

“If I’m in a virtual meeting with a customer and he need a piece of information that I don’t have, I’ll jabber or spark a colleague during the meeting, and I know I’ll get an answer in a couple minutes.” (Respondent 4)

Spark rooms dedicated for certain solution architectures to get instant answers on questions were also mentioned to be a way in which technology was used for fast gathering of information;

“I’m in a Spark room for almost all architectures, like I’m in a room for security, and a room for EN (enterprise networking) for example. When I’m with a customer virtually, I’ll ask a question in one of those rooms, which often have hundreds of people from all over the world, and I know I’ll get an answer pretty quick. It’s often been a lifesaver.” (Respondent 5)

All respondents mentioned using instant messaging as a manner to get information quickly, and from many different people with the specific knowledge, or in the specific technology area, needed. The interviews showed that the implementation of Jabber in 2007 and Spark in 2017 is primarily used as a facilitating tool for the sales process between the employees, and not between customer and seller. The respondents stated that often, these IM tools are being used during meetings as a way of collecting information quickly for the customer. The interviews also showed that it also is being used as a tool for the salespersons to send one another files relevant to work or customers, and asking for help related to technologies.

Virtual Demos

Virtual demos were also a topic that came up with every single respondent, in relation to the communication technologies they use in their sales process. Four respondents mentioned virtual demos as an important aspect to speed up the sales process. They explained that without the use virtual collaboration tools, the sales process could be extended with weeks, just because of the demos. Previously, a meeting would have had to be scheduled with the salesperson, an engineer or sales specialist, and the different lines of businesses in a customer organization. A date would have had to be found to suit all participants and to ensure the solution being demoed is available (this relates especially to collaboration tools, according to the participants). These four participants shared the view that by using video conferencing, demos can be done on the spot through screen sharing functions or simply using the camera from the laptop or collaboration solution;

“If I’m pitching the idea of Meraki with centralised management and all its capabilities for application visibility and control, and heat maps for offices, I’ll simply share my screen on

Spark or WebEx to show the customer exactly how the solution would look. If the customer wants to see how the Spark board works, I'll just take my laptop with the Spark video call or WebEx call, find a board, and show them how to use it. Without the video conferencing solutions that we use, I'd pitch the solution to the customer, then schedule another meeting for the demo, which to be honest would extend the sales process by maybe a week or two.”
(Respondent 5)

Only one respondent showed a slight dislike to virtual demos, on the basis of having had some unfortunate issues in which the technology failed during the demo. The respondent stated having used screen sharing to show a Cisco DNA management solution, but had to cut the demo short because of lags and poor internet connection. The respondent did acknowledge that this was more of a consequence of the internet connection, and that virtual demo in itself aren't the problem.

To summarize this point, communication technologies is something that plays a major role in Cisco's salesforce today, whether they are field or virtual salespersons. Video conferencing showed to be a valuable tool for salespersons in both types of sales role in maintaining contact with their customer without having to physically meet, yet maintaining this person to person contact through high quality video and audio conferencing. Instant messaging is another communication technology that all five respondents saw value in and used on a daily basis, though primarily to communicate with one another internally, and to have faster access to necessary information. Lastly, within communication technologies the importance of demos came up with every respondent. Using the Cisco virtual communication tools such as Spark or WebEx, the salesperson is able to conduct virtual demos of solutions they pitch, without having to extend the sales process to schedule a new date for a demo.

6.3 Findings Related to Relationship Between Customer and Seller

6.3.1 Finding Three: Relationship Building

All five respondents emphasized the importance of a strong relationship to their customer in both sales roles;

“If you don’t have a good relation to your customer, they won’t trust you, and you won’t make your quota.” Respondent two said; *“I spend a lot of time building rapport to make my customers open up and feel comfortable with me... the customers I have the best relationship to are my best customers.”* (Respondent 1)

“It’s important for me to get along with my customers, if they’re happy with me, they’ll be more open when I propose solutions.” (Respondent 3)

“Cisco is expensive, so I need to have a strong relation to my customers. If the technological architecture is similar between us and the competitor, the customer will choose the salesperson they like and trust the most.” (Respondent 4)

“In virtual and field, it doesn’t matter, you need to have a strong bond to the customer, there needs to be trust and openness. That way, they’ll be more favourable to your proposal, even if we’re more expensive.” (Respondent 5)

When interviewing the respondents regarding their relationship to their customers, respondents one, four and five called themselves “*trusted advisors*” to their customers, both in field and in virtual sales roles. Respondents two and three called themselves sales consultants and stated that their primary goal was to ensure the customer’s interests are being taken care of. In field sales, two respondents mentioned spending time with their customers doing non-work-related activities. Respondent three mentioned going golfing with customers, and respondent two claimed to try to make time for business lunches and dinners

to build the relationship to the customers.

In virtual sales, all five respondents mentioned showing interest by never letting too much time go by between calls. In field sales however, two respondents said it was hard maintaining the relationship with the customer, but small things, like sending an email with an interesting and relevant article could keep the communication going.

Furthermore, in terms of relationship building, all respondents mentioned the benefits of using WebEx and TelePresence for communicating with their customers. Four of the five respondents stated that people buy from people. All five of the respondents stated that frequent visual communication and rapport was vital in their success;

“WebEx and TP (TelePresence) makes it possible for me to have proper communication with my customer and to properly build rapport. As a salesperson, we learn to mimic the person we’re talking to, to make you more relatable and trustworthy, it’s a subconscious thing. When we do virtual meetings, I can see how my customer is acting, and act accordingly to strengthen my position.” (Respondent 2)

Respondent three stated that using virtual collaboration solutions, it was possible to be efficient by allowing for time to meet several customers without having to travel, but to also build rapport with the customer by letting the customer meet with the salesperson face-to-face, but virtually. This respondent further stated that it makes the customer more comfortable to see the salesperson, even if it’s over video, rather than being advised by a voice over the phone.

Overall, neither of the five respondents indicated that virtual collaboration tools as a mediator to communication with a customer had any negative impact on the relationship building. In fact, all five respondents showed a positive perception to using technology as a mediator, as a source of efficiency, simplicity, and with similar efficacy as face to face meetings.

6.3.2 Finding Four: Software for understanding customer situation and needs

Based on the interviews, the CRM tool that is primarily being used within the Cisco sales force is Salesforce.com. This tool is used in relation to managing the relationship between the sales person and the customer. Salesforce allows the salesperson to document all conversations they have with all their customers, enabling them to see who they have contacted, when, and regarding what. Four respondents (respondents 1, 3, 4 and 5) stated using this tool consistently, stating that it helps them greatly in managing their customers and following up with them. The tool enables the salesperson to track when last conversations occurred, the topic of the discussion, and notes on the customer's future plans and strategies, as well as when their current licenses or subscriptions need to be renewed, and networks need to be refreshed. It also enables the salesperson to see how the rest of their team in their vertical is doing in terms of their quota.

The respondents to the interviews all saw value in using the tool for land, adopt, expand and renew opportunities with their customers as well as stating they believe it can speed up the sales process. Respondent two, however claimed not to use the tool as often as its colleagues, due to the time-consuming process of documenting all discussions and opportunities with customers. This respondent did however clarify that it is a very useful tool, though one needs to *“really be bothered”* to go into the software tool at the end of every day or every call, but that if used properly, it can be a valuable asset in maintaining the customer relationship. Respondent two did state using it for the purpose of tracking the forecasting and the orders coming in, but not as a way of managing relationships.

One respondent stated that Salesforce truly helps him in managing his customers, and that without it, it'd be hard for him to keep track of his 250 and more customers;

“I've got C category customers, which means I have all the small commercial companies as customer. I have about 250 customers right now, so salesforce makes it easier for me to see who I've talked to and when, and lets me manage the next meetings more easily. It also

allows my manager to keep track of what I'm doing and how many customers I manage to work with." (Respondent 3)

A respondent stated using salesforce actively to make better leads with its customer, stating that CRM technology allows the customers data to be processed in the tool, and presents it in a single dashboard that is easy to read. The same respondent stated that the use of Salesforce has become increasingly strict over the years;

"In my first two years in field sales I wasn't using Salesforce as actively as I do now. That's partly because I didn't truly see the value of it and saw it more of a hassle. My manager now forces the team to use it properly and actively to ensure better forecasting and better management of our customers. I'll be honest, I'm really happy we have tools like Salesforce, it can be a hassle, but it's very helpful." (Respondent 5)

Three respondents made indicative statements as to why Salesforce has become increasingly important to the managerial level of the sales teams at Cisco. Respondents 1, 3 and 5 stated that filling in Salesforce opportunities and customer meetings and conversations properly facilitates the process of changing account managers responsible for customers. Respondent one stated that when they change from virtual so field sales, their customers change, and being able to access information on past conversations and agreements with their new customers greatly facilitates the change of customer.

Another respondent (respondent 1) stated that the primary value of Salesforce in their own opinion is that the salesperson has access to all the customer information from any device, whether it's a laptop, iPhone or tablet. This respondent said that the instant and easy access of all information, which can be organized into reports and graphs and charts in dashboards helps increase the time of the sales process.

Salesforce as a customer relationship management tool that speeds up the sales process is a comment that was made by four of the five respondents explicitly, whilst one said he sees

how it can speed up the sales process, but doesn't use it actively personally;

“It's easier to make your quota and make your customer happy when you can see all your customer information from one single pane of glass.” This respondent also said; “with all the information I've collected on the customer located in one app on my phone or laptop I can easily contact my customer when the renewal time has come, or follow up on upsell opportunities based on previous purchases they've made and how happy they are with them.” (respondent 1)

Another respondent, respondent three, stated that a tool that uses data collection and analysis which can be accessed from any device helps speed up the sales process by reducing time spend on customer research, looking back at “messy notes” from customer calls, and reducing the need to call a customer back asking them to remind them of what Cisco solutions they are currently using.

To summarize this finding, the five respondents from Cisco's salesforce all stated seeing value in a solution that collects and analyses data, and presents it in an easy to understand dashboard. Four of the respondents stated that Salesforce helps them speed up the sales process. Furthermore, all respondents stated that data collection and analysis tools such as Salesforce helps them better maintain their customers to enhance their satisfaction, and to aid the salesperson in meeting their quotas.

6.4 Summary of the most relevant results:

- ❖ 5 respondents stated having higher frequency of communication with customers when using virtual communication tools
- ❖ 5 respondents stated virtual communication tools to facilitate scheduling meetings with customers
- ❖ 5 respondents stated being more efficient with technology as a mediator
- ❖ 3 respondents explicitly stated field sales as being inefficient

- ❖ Virtual communication tools are used in both field and virtual sales, though phone and face to face meetings are the preferred choices in field sales
- ❖ Information sharing was found to be facilitated by technology, though there was no significant difference in information sharing in one sales role compared to the other
- ❖ 4 respondents perceived virtual tools as facilitating demos and speeding up the sales process
- ❖ 5 respondents stated using technology solutions to keep in touch with customers on a regular basis
- ❖ 0 respondents perceived technology as mediator to have a negative impact on customer-seller relationship directly
- ❖ 5 respondents stated using IM tools internally as a method to access information quicker
- ❖ 5 respondents stated Salesforce having the ability to speed up the sales process
- ❖ 3 respondents stated that Salesforce simplifies the process of changing the account manager responsible for customers

7. Chapter 7 - Analysis of Results

The analysis chapter aims to present the findings of the in-depth interviews that were conducted with five Cisco sales people in light of the theories presented in chapter two. The analysis looks to explore the findings of how the sales people interviewed find that IT has impacted the sales process, and how virtual and field sales roles differ in terms of the use of technology in both roles. The analysis part further aims to discover how IT has affected communications and relationships between the customer and the seller in Cisco, and the benefits and disadvantages that IT brings in the sales process. The following section will look at the results that came from these analyses and conclusions that can be made based on them.

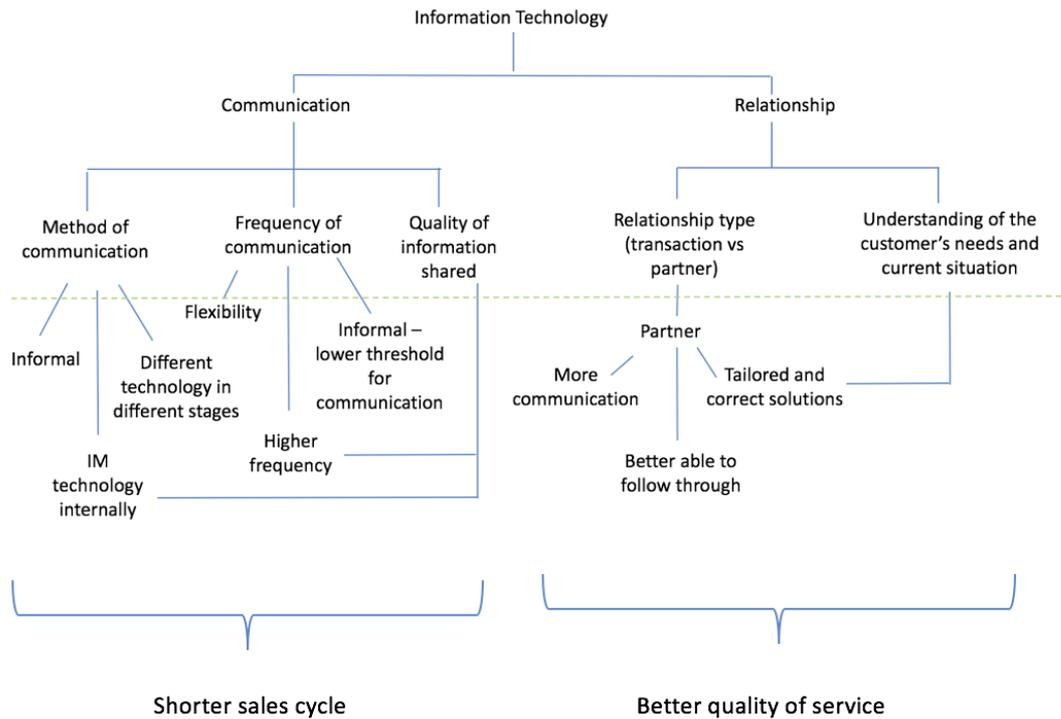


Figure 6 Extended Model

Figure 6 summarizes the findings from the analysis that are presented in this chapter. The part under the green dotted line show the findings of how the different aspects of communication and relationship between customer and seller have been affected by the use of IT in the sales process. The model further shows how different aspects of communication relate to one another, such as that the higher frequency of communication and the use of IM technology internally in the seller organization impact the quality of information shared. This can also be seen in the relationship side of the sales process, in which a partner-based type of relationship leads to more tailored and correct solutions, which also is a consequence of the seller having a better understanding of the customer's needs and current situation.

The interviews looked to see how technology has impacted B2B sales by looking deeper into how technology is used in communication and the relationship building between buyer and seller. Within communication, the interviews shed light on how technology impacts frequency, method, and quality of the communication. On the other hand, within relationship the research looks at how technology has changed the type of relationship the customer and

seller has to one another, as well as how technology has changed the understanding the seller can have of its customers' needs and current situation in order to be more relevant and maximize value.

7.1.1 Technology in the sales process

The interviews showed that technology plays a major role in communication in the B2B sales cycle. Moncrief and Marshall's (2005) seven steps of selling, from prospecting to follow-up are all very relevant to today's sales cycle in Cisco, and the interviews showed that this is primarily done with technology as mediator for the majority of the sales persons. In prospecting, the interviews showed a major use of Salesforce to create leads and create opportunities, a process explored by Kenworthy (2001), in which he saw the use of technology systems in the form of software to enable for data analysis to facilitate turning customer data to opportunities. Moncrief and Marshall (2005) also highlighted that technology greatly facilitates the pre-approach step, something that was brought up by all five respondents during the interviews. Moreover, the interviews showed not only that technology in the form of data analysis tools for customer relationship management facilitated this approach, but that it increased the speed of this process, and thus shortens the sales cycle.

The use of software for the pre-approach steps can be said to aid in increasing the speed of the process of the sales cycle in that it reduces the amount of time a salesperson has to spend researching customers. Moreover, the salesperson can get an overview over a certain customer's previous interaction with other salespersons in the seller organization company, without the salesperson having to take contact with several colleagues to first find out who the previous account manager was, and second, what the discussions entailed. It can thus be agreed upon that data analysis tools have impacted the way salespersons create leads and opportunities and prepare for approaching the customer, to better appeal to their needs. This can further be seen as a way in which the sales process has become more efficient, where four respondents stated that Salesforce helps them speed up the sales process. Furthermore, the respondents of the interviews discussed how technology has enabled for a larger value creation in the first phases of the sales cycle by enabling data to be turned into usable information to properly respond to customer needs; a point which was made by Clark, Rocco

and Bush (2007). This can further be looked as a way in which the data analysis and collection software can enable for a better quality of service for the customers, as the information is more personalized, up to date, and the sales process moves faster.

Another correlation can be made between the results of the interviews and the research presented in terms of the use of customer relationship management tools in the sales process. Angel (2003), and Lynch and de Chernatorny (2007) explain that seller organizations use branding as a way of minimizing the dependency vendors have on sales persons. The results of the interviews didn't bring forth arguments of branding being used in this case; however, Salesforce was explained to be a tool which facilitates the managing of customers without being dependent on a specific account manager. The use of a technology software to reduce the dependency of a specific salesperson can thus be seen to resonate with theory in which organizations attempt to reduce the importance of specific salespersons for risk minimization. Moreover, using software to "manage" relationships with customers enable the company to maintain the same strong relationship with customer organizations in case the account manager in charge of the customer leaves the vendor organization for example. This also can be seen as a way to make the relationship between Cisco and the customer remain stable, despite changes in the sales force. Technology in the form of software collection and analysis for customer relation management can thus be seen as having impacted the B2B sales process, by minimizing the importance of certain salesperson in terms of knowledge related to a customer. Technological tools like Salesforce enable for the customer knowledge and industry knowledge to be kept within the company, without being dependent on a single person.

The following steps are further based on technology in which the salesperson communicates with the customer in a virtual manner, both for the field and virtual sales persons. The literature research showed that the presentation step of the sales cycle has been impacted by changes in technology in that laptops with internet access in which salespersons easily can look up information the customer may be asking for during the meetings (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999). Although none of the respondents stated searching up answers on the internet for customers during customer meetings, all respondents did mention using internal instant messaging applications, such as Spark or Jabber, to communicate with colleagues who may have the answers the customer is looking

for. The literature explaining the benefit of technology in the sales process as something that enables for looking up information on laptops can be assumed to not have been discovered may be because the literature dates back from a time in which this was a huge break-through in the market. Today, the ability to search up information during meetings through the use of a portable laptop is considered a norm, and thus not something salesperson truly consider a benefit, as this is how it's always been for them, Although the use of the computer in meetings is different, Moncrief and Marshall (2005), and Moncrief, Marshall and Lassk's (1999) theory still appears to be relevant to today's use case of computers to attain information quickly. This further implies the assumption that technology has impacted the sales process, by facilitating access to information and communication. This can further imply that the quality of the salesperson's help to the customer is higher, as they have the ability to receive information from sales specialists in Spark chat rooms in an instant. Furthermore, instant messaging internally implies a move towards informal communication, in which, instead of salespersons booking meetings or making a call to an expert or an engineer in the company, they instead post questions in forums for a quick but concise answer.

Furthermore, despite expectations, both field and virtual sales persons make use of technology throughout the whole sales cycle. Despite literature showing that the sales process has been impacted by technology, I had an assumption that salespersons in field sales did not make as much use of virtual communication tools as it was discovered that they did in the interviews. When asked about what part of the sales cycle in which technology plays the most vital role, none of the respondents could give a clear answer. Based on the research and the interviews, it is clear that in both sales roles, technology is a key mediator between the customer and seller. It was discovered however that the type of technology used in each phase does vary significantly. As expected based on the research by Kenworthy (2001) and Moncrief and Marshall (2005), the technology that plays the most significant role in the prospecting and pre-approach phases are software that allow for analysis of data collected on customers. In Moncrief and Marshall's (2004) steps three through six, approach to close, however, video conferencing systems were the primary use of technology solution. These tools were primarily WebEx, then TelePresence, and Spark third, in the order of the most to least used with customers. Some of the respondents in field sales however stated that in this role, as opposed to virtual sales, their use of video conferencing as a form of

communication with customers declined, because they preferred conducting face to face meetings. Nonetheless, we see a trend in those conferencing solutions being used as a method of communication which allows for efficiency and flexibility, as is reported by Hoefling (2001), who saw that virtual tools enabled for flexibility. Furthermore, the use of the video conferencing technologies implies a shift towards more informal communication, as virtual meetings were uncovered to often be more spontaneous, whereas face to face meetings were uncovered to have to be planned a while in advance and to be more formal in nature.

As for the follow-up phase, similar to the research made by Marshall and Moncrief (2005), the interviews showed that the primary form of technology used is the old-fashioned email technology, with phone calls at a close second place. Moncrief and Marshall (2005) state that emails are a simple way of contacting a customer to ensure that they are happy with their purchase. Furthermore, this research showed that phone calls are less efficient for follow ups, as persons in organizations are harder to reach by phone than by emails. This argument was not made in the interviews, however phone calls were said to be slightly less desirable to emails, because phone calls would take up more time, and the time would be better spent closing another deal, as opposed to follow up on an already closed deal. Another aspect of the follow up phase that was uncovered, is that the role of Customer Success has been created in Cisco, which entails a team of Customer Success Managers being responsible for following up with the customers after a purchase was made in a more “hands-on” manner. This is showing a shift from an informal method of communication in which the salesperson follows up out of a sense of obligation, with no concrete intention of spending resources on this stage, to a more formal form of communication in which a team is dedicated to following up on customers. This can be considered a positive shift in terms of successful collaboration between the seller organization and the customer, on the basis that Mohr, Fisher and Nevin’s (1996) research holds, in which they state that formal communication is the basis for a successful collaborative communication.

7.1.2 Communication

The salespersons that were interviewed, whether in virtual or field sales roles, all stated having major pressure put on them to properly follow up with customers in all phases of the sales cycle, and needing to cater to several customers at a time. Hughes, McKee and Singler (1999) saw this phenomenon as well and stated that this led to salespeople not having as much time available to communicate with their customers. This point was also discovered in the interviews, in which the respondents stated that conducting virtual meetings enables them to talk to more customers in a day or week. Although no numerical value was discovered in terms of how much more efficient virtual meetings make the salespeople, Merrill Lynch reporting they experienced a 15 to 20% increase in productivity after one year with virtual collaboration solutions (Wells, 2001). Based on the interviews, a similar trend can be assumed to be relevant. One respondent stated that field sales was “*inefficient*” because of the need to travel back and forth for customer meetings, whereas this respondent could conduct meetings of the same quality from the office, thus reaching out and keeping in touch with more people than his colleagues do in field sales.

Furthermore, Hoefling (2001) stated that technology as a mediator in the sales process enables flexibility for the salespeople, and thus empowering them. This point is reinforced from the interviews conducted, in which the respondents saw virtual collaboration as a solution that enabled them to work flexibly, from wherever and whenever. This flexibility was discovered to primarily come from the ability to work from wherever, without having to work around coordinating schedules for all the stakeholders necessary for customer meetings. This is a point which can be reinforced by Daft’s (1983) theory in which he saw that face to face communication in B2B sales requires coordinating meetings so that all people can be present at the same time and place. Moreover, the salespersons noticed virtual communication as enabling for flexibility by being able to conduct instant demos or add experts to calls spontaneously, a process which is not possible in face to face meetings.

The result of the lack of flexibility that was uncovered during the interviews was shown to be a longer sales process, which can be lengthened by a couple of weeks in field sales, especially when a demo has to be scheduled, in which several people have to be present. Face to face communication was thus seen to reduce frequency of communication and

lengthen the sales process, especially when demos had to be conducted, due to lack of flexibility in terms of scheduling meetings and having the technology available.

Mohr and Nevin (1990) presented four aspects to communication in B2B sales, those being frequency, formality, direction and modality. The interviews showed that technology as a mediator in the sales process greatly increases the frequency of communication between the customer and the seller. The respondents stated that the threshold for communication is lower when the relationship has been built around voice and video calls, as opposed to formal face to face meetings. More on this point, the interviews showed that face to face communication typically is associated with higher formality. Informal face to face communication, on the other hand, is seen to enable more depth in conversation; according to Donato, Bartlett, Hager & Ekman (1999). The interviews did not give any impression as to the fact that informal face to face communication occurs in the field sales role, however the informality of the virtual communication was seen with great positivity by the respondents. More, on this point, high frequency and informal two-way communication between sellers and customers is associated with more relational and market exchange, according to both the interviews and research made by Mohr and Nevin (1990). Furthermore, because literature shows that high frequency in communication is vital for a successful relationship between the buyer and the seller (Peters & Fletcher, 2004; Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Ramani & Kumar, 2008) and virtual communication is something that enables this, according to the interviews, it can be determined that a greater focus on virtual communication can be a beneficial investment. Moreover, because it was uncovered that the threshold for communication between the buyer and the seller is lower in virtual sales, it can be implied that this is another way in which the sales process can be shortened. More communication can be seen to imply more information sharing, more trust, and thus higher chance of success in sales.

As for platform of communication, the interviews showed that, opposite to my assumptions, sales persons in a field sales role still communicate with their customers over technological solutions, such as WebEx or TelePresence. However, two of the respondents stated having a lower use of virtual collaboration tools for communicating with customers in field sales than they did when in virtual sales. Normal voice phone calls were also a primary method of communication between the seller and the customer, which enables for more frequent

communication than if it was purely done physically. Gibson and Gibbs (2006) saw that in virtual communication, problems typically arise due to lack of non-verbal cues, delays, technical failures, etc. These issues were brought up by only one respondent who stated a dislike for virtual communication through WebEx. This respondent however stated a strong appreciation for the virtual meeting tool Spark, which came out in 2017. Overall, only one respondent of the five stated having an issue with virtual collaboration and preferring face to face contact with customers. Despite this, all five respondents greatly saw the value in using virtual meeting tools, as the advanced collaborations solutions that exist today enable for high quality voice and video solutions that make you feel as though you're sitting in the same room as the customer. Moreover, pure face to face communication was uncovered to be unrealistic and inefficient, as each salesperson is responsible for too many customers to be able to conduct all meetings in a face to face situation. This bears a resemblance to Daft's (1983) research in which he states that the lack of efficiency in face to face sales is an unsustainable way of conducting business in the long term.

Technology as a mediator for communication in B2B sales has also been discovered to bring major value in terms of information sharing. Literature by Townsend, DeMarie and Hendrickson (1998), as well as Zecher (1994), alongside with the answers collected from the interviews with Cisco's salesforce show that with virtual conferencing, one is able to share more and richer information than in a face to face meeting. The literature and the interviews show this phenomenon by reinforcing the capabilities of technology, enabling for the sharing of graphs and data in real time, as well as white boarding and annotating documents and images over the video conference tool. Furthermore, the use of technology enables more information sharing in both ways, in which customers are also able to show issues they are experiencing in their network through mobile virtual meetings, which is enabled through WebEx and Spark. Moreover, the quality of information sharing can be linked back to the method of communication internally in Cisco, in which the salespersons would seek answers to customer questions in chat rooms, during the meetings with the customer. This can further allow for the interpretation that technology as a mediator in B2B sales conversation enables for a higher quality in information shared.

7.1.3 Relationship between customer and seller

The interviews showed that a strong and trusted relationship between buyer and seller was a major aspect in the success of a salesperson, and this statement can be supported by the Social Exchange Theory, Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Stewart (2005). All five respondents in the interviews stated the importance of communicating often with their customers, being genuine, and balancing the personal and business spectrum. Though the motivation behind the need for a strong relationship with their customers varied amongst the respondents, all stated a strong reliance on technology to help maintain and manage those relationships.

All five respondents stated that in virtual and field sales, they'd never allow for too much time to go between conversations. In field sales however, two respondents stated that maintaining a strong relationship with a customer is more difficult than in virtual sales, because, as has been discovered and explained earlier, the frequency of communication in virtual sales is higher because of the lower threshold for contacting one another. The two respondents who mentioned the difficulty in managing the relationship with their customers in field sales did however explain that they may contact their customer by sending a link to an interesting and relevant article, to ensure that them as a salesperson and Cisco stay relevant to the customer. It becomes clear in this case that technology is vital in aiding salesperson in maintaining a relationship with their customer, by enabling for easy contact and communication. Moreover, with technology as a mediator, so in virtual sales primarily, because there is more contact between the customer and the seller, it was uncovered that the relationship was more like a partnership, than in field sales, where this could often become transaction-based. Because the customer and seller do not meet as often in field sales, once the sale is closed, it was discovered in the interviews that the contact would be reduced; which implies more of a transaction based approach. With virtual sales, and the major use of virtual collaboration tools for communication and the use of Salesforce, the seller is better able to follow through on conversation, and to offer the customer more specific and tailored solutions. This statement can be reflected in Day's (1994) statement in which it was discovered that being able to collect and share relevant customer information with the customer enables for a stronger relationship between the customer and seller. Moreover, Peppers and Rogers (2004) saw that the ability of the seller to possess rich information on the customer allows for the ability to deliver greater value to the customer, enhancing the

value created in the customer-seller relationship. This brings us back to the original point in which software technology for data collection and analysis can be seen as a tool that enables for stronger relationships in B2B sales than could be possible without the technology.

As has been explored in the communication side of the analysis, CRM tools, like Salesforce which is being used in Cisco, play a major role in aiding salespersons in establishing a strong relationship to their customers. Shoemaker (2001) explains that CRM tools enable salesperson to combine data from sales, marketing and service information to build customer-seller relationships. Peppers and Rogers (2004) establish that using such a tool enables salesperson to offer greater value to their customers. The respondents of the interviews all stated that Salesforce enable the salesperson to take contact with customers using relevant and up to date information, thus enabling them to offer the most tailored, specific and relevant solution to their customers. This further gives an indication that Cisco, and its salesforce is better able to cater to the needs of their customers, by being able to create solutions for them based on their actual needs and goals, as well as the correct technology to match those. The salesforce can also be seen to be better able to understand the customer's needs through the use of Salesforce and data analysis software by enabling the salesperson to get a complete, close to 360-degree overview of how the customer's situation. Kotler and Keller (2005) make a similar point in which customer relationship management tools allow for a seller organization to gather large amounts of data on their customer and record all touch points of the customer. The data collected and analysed can, through the use of Salesforce, date back to before their current account manager even had this customer, and can thus ensure that the account manager is up to date and informed on the customer's past purchases, issues, and goals. This ability to have access to such a large amount of organized and analysed data can be seen as a way in which technology enables for a better quality of service for the customer, as the seller organization can make better suggestions and proposals of technological strategies for customers, based on a full data range.

The interviews showed that none of the respondents believe technology as a mediator has any negative impact on building a relationship with a customer. All the respondents stated making use of technology throughout the whole sales process to enhance efficiency, share information more easily, build leads and opportunities, stay current on market trends, and

conduct meetings virtually whenever and wherever. Furthermore, virtual communication tools and the use of software like Salesforce to manage the relationship, enable the salesperson to offer more tailored and correct solutions to the customer, by having a 360 view of their situation, and by enabling the salesperson to gather much more information through a higher frequency of virtual meetings. Moreover, conducting virtual meetings is showing a push towards a partner-based relationship, as opposed to a transaction-based relationship, as it often can become in field.

7.2 Conclusion of Analysis

This chapter looked at the results of the interviews aligned to the theories and literature presented in chapter two. The analysis uncovered that communication and relationship between customer and seller can indeed be seen to have been impacted by technology, more specifically by the use of virtual collaboration tools and software for data collection. Communication has been impacted in terms of transitioning from a higher use of virtual collaboration tools with customers and instant messaging between the salespersons internally in the vendor company. Moreover, the use of technology as a mediator in communication showed that this has led to a more informal type of communication, and that the type of technology used in each phase of the sales cycle varies. Frequency of communication was seen to have increased with the use of technology as a mediator. This was shown to lead to more flexibility for the sales person and customer, and that this has led to a more informal type of communication which leads to a lower threshold for reaching out to the customer or seller. The quality of information was also uncovered to be higher with the shift towards virtual sales. This can be seen to be caused by the use of IM technology as well as the higher frequency of communication. The effect of technology use on the B2B sales process in terms of communication can thus be seen to be a shorter sales cycle.

As for the relationship side of the research, the relationship type has transitioned from transaction-based to partner-based. This is seen to be caused by the fact that technology enables for more communication, better ability to follow up with customers, and more tailored and customer-specific solutions. Moreover, it was uncovered that with technology, like virtual collaboration tools that enable for a higher frequency in communication and software for customer relationship management, that the salesperson can have a better understanding of the customer's current situation and needs, which further leads to more

tailored and correct solutions, more specific to that customer. This impact on the relationship between customer and seller can be seen to affect the B2B sales process by enabling for a higher quality of service.

In short, the analysis uncovered that the use technology, and more specifically virtual sales, enables for a shorter sales cycle and better quality of service.

8. Chapter 8 - Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this research paper was to study the implications of technology in the B2B sales process in terms of communication and relationship between customer and seller. Another point of this paper was to look for where the use of technology in the sales process brings benefits, and where the limitations and weaknesses of technology lie. In order to find answers, interviews were conducted with Cisco salespersons, to understand better the differences between virtual and field sales, where one is supposedly purely technological base, whereas the other was supposedly face-to-face-based, and thus not quite mediated by technology. The interviews looked to discover how within communication, the mode of communication, the frequency of communication and the quality of the information shared varied between field and virtual sales. It further looked to understand how these variables were affected directly by the use of technology, whether this be for communication or for research and opportunity planning.

As for the relationship side of the model, the interviews looked to understand how the sales role, whether it is technology based (virtual sales) or field based, affects the type of relationship between the customer and seller, so whether the use of technology enables for a more long-term partnership or if it leads to a transaction based relationship. Furthermore, the interviews looked to understand whether technology enables the salesperson to understand the current situation and the needs of a customer better, and if so, how.

In order to find answers for all this, five in-depth interviews were conducted with salespersons in Cisco who have experience in both field and virtual sales, in order to get insight into where technology leads to benefits or issues in the process. These interviews led to the discovery of four primary themes which are presented in figure 5: 1) communication, 2) communication technology, 3) relationship management technology, 4) relationship building. These themes can be considered as the aspects of the sales process and the ways in which IT has impacted the B2B sales process. Generally, the five respondents agreed on the benefits and the value of the use of technology.

8.1 Discussions of the results

Communication

The findings showed that all five respondents saw a higher frequency in communication with customers when using virtual communication tools, and that this was primarily because of the lower threshold for taking contact. Another reason for the higher frequency in communication in field sales was discovered to be because scheduling meetings with customers was facilitated. Moreover, all respondents stated a much higher efficiency in work when using technology as a mediator, and no one reported technology having a negative impact on technology.

Another main finding related to communication was that when this is mediated by technology in virtual sales, the communication between the customer and the seller becomes more informal than it is in field sales, which also contributes to more flexibility, which in turns increases the frequency of the communication.

The communication in virtual sales also implies a higher quality of the information shared, primarily because of the ability to communicate more often with the customer to get a better understanding of their needs and situation. Also, it appears as though the use of software tools such as Salesforce enable for a higher quality of communication and information shared between customer and seller because the conversation is based on customer-specific information in which the salesperson tries to solve a specific need, as opposed to the salesperson simply trying to sell for the purpose of making their quota.

As a whole, the interviews give an indication that in virtual sales, the sales cycle is shortened, as opposed to in field sales. This appears to be a result of the different variables combined, the method of communication, the frequency of communication and the quality of the information shared.

Relationship

As for the relationship side of the sales process, the interviews showed that no one perceives technology as having a negative impact on the relationship with the customer. There were major differences between field sales and virtual sales that were uncovered in terms of relationship building however. In virtual sales, the customer and seller were more often in touch, which enables for the building of a relationship and partnership between the two parties. In field sales however, it was uncovered that the salespersons had to make use of technology to maintain the relationship, for example through calling or sending articles and such. The interviews did show that more effort had to be made to maintain the relationship with the customer, because of the difficulty in making time for the customer for discussions outside of business-related activities. Furthermore, even in field sales, the salesperson makes use of Salesforce to have a better understanding of the customer, and to have a way of documenting past encounters and discussions, enabling for better maintaining of the relationship.

Moreover, in terms of the relationship between the customer and the seller, it can be understood that the use of Salesforce, or other similar management relationship management tools are being used as a way of changing the relationship environment. The use of relationship management software appears to reduce the importance of the salesperson in itself, whilst maintaining a relationship between the customer organization and the seller organization.

It can thus be understood from this research that technology enables for a better quality of service in the B2B sales process. Technology, such as video conferencing and customer relationship management software enables the sales persons to have more communication, follow through easier on past conversations, and offer more tailored and customer-specific solutions. Moreover, the information on a customer isn't directly linked to a single account manager, implying that if an account manager were to quit or lose the account, the customer information that was collected in the past would still be accessible for the next account manager or for someone else in the seller organizations. This enables for an easier transition between turnover of salespersons. All these results can be seen as enhancing the quality of service of the customer.

8.2 Theoretical Implications

There is currently a lot of literature and research articles on how effective virtual teams are. There is however a lack of research in how the customers and sellers in a B2B process perceive the use of technology as a facilitator for communication. This research paper attempts to advance current contributions in the impact of technology-based selling in a B2B context.

This research paper does still fall into line with existing theory on the B2B sales process, presented by Moncrief and Marshall in 2004. Moreover, the steps in the sales process were found to be the same, but the technology that Moncrief and Marshall present as technologies to facilitate the steps are also in line with the research that was conducted for this paper. More research into how much efficiency these tools bring in each step may strengthen the argument that technology works as a facilitator and as a source of efficiency in sales.

Anderson (1996) stated that B2B sales companies aim to enable mobility in their workforce through the use of technology solutions, such as video conferencing, virtual private networks and electronic data exchange. This study shows that mobility is indeed achieved through the use of technology, in which salespersons stated being able to have up to date information of their customers at all times from any device, and being able to communicate with them virtually from anywhere. Davenport and Pearlson concluded that technology is being used as a way to enable salespersons to connect to their customers in a more flexible manner, which is supported by this study. However, an extension to this which was discovered in the research of this paper, is that a technology based relationship in the B2B sales process not only helps sales persons in contacting their customers, but vice versa also.

Hunter and Perreault (2007) found that technology can influence the performance of sales in three ways in terms of information, those being access, analysing and communicating. This was found to be true in this research. An extension to Hunter and Perreault's research can be seen to be the way in which technology facilitates this. Customer relationship management tools like Salesforce positively influence information access and analysis, by reducing the

amount of time and effort a salesperson has to spend on these tasks. It also allows for more rich information gathering, as data collection and analysis tools can make use of data that was collected before the time of the current account manager. Furthermore, technology enables for better information sharing, as Hunter and Perreault discovered, though in this research it was found to be primarily because of the ability to gather information in real time in an instant messaging, internal manner between salespersons. Furthermore, information sharing was found to be of higher quality with technology because of the ability to do demos spontaneously.

Another extension to existing theory is an extension to Mohr and Nevin's (1990) research on B2B relationships and how communication impacts this. Mohr and Nevin saw that four aspects to communication impacts the relationship, those being frequency, direction, modality and content. Modality wasn't a key aspect that was looked into in this research. Two-way communication between a seller and customer is a natural way of communicating in Cisco, and a one-way communication is typically only used in the form of emails to maintain contact regularly, though more in field sales. Moreover, Mohr and Nevin's research is from 1990, which is almost twenty years ago, and suggests that there likely has been changes in the norms of communication between buyer and seller.

Gibson and Gibb's (2006) research on the communication problems that arise when using technology as a mediator was proven to not be supported in this research paper. Lack of non-verbal cues, information delay and loss and technical failure which ultimately leads to job dissatisfaction was not a situation that the sales persons at Cisco found themselves in. This could perhaps be because of advances in technological communication solutions between 2006 and 2017. Cisco collaboration tools enable for high quality audio and video integrated in one solution, and thus does not prevent from the detection of facial cues. Research showing that virtual communication enables for more complex levels of communication than face to face meetings (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998) played a major part in this research. When interviewing the respondents, it was discovered that this is in fact supported by the current situation in sales in Cisco. All respondents mentioned the benefit of being able to share screens with customers for demos or for sharing of information. What isn't included in Townsend, DeMarie and Hendrickson's research however is the benefit of virtual communication in terms of being able to discreetly get information from colleagues

through instant messaging, whilst on the virtual call with a customer. Another benefit which was discovered in the research was that virtual communication enables for richer communication by enabling to add other experts or engineers to calls spontaneously, enhancing the quality of communication.

8.3 Managerial Implications

This research on how technology impacts the sales cycle in a B2B context can be greatly beneficial for managers' understanding of the importance of putting focus on virtual sales. Although virtual sales isn't a new concept, there are still few empirical research articles dedicated to uncovering the effect of concept for a company. The interviews with the salespersons in Cisco showed great insight into the benefits of virtual sales from the salespersons perspective. Managers and companies who focus on B2B sales and want to expand the virtual sales team should consider conducting research on the effect on virtual sales from the customer's perspective to ensure that it is a mutually benefit solution and approach to sales.

This research paper however does show that all five respondents see virtual sales as a much more efficient way of conducting business, which gives an indication to the employee satisfaction in this role, as well the success rate of the sales process when technology is used as a mediator. Again, understanding whether this efficiency works in the favour of the customer as well would need to be assessed in order to understand if it is an investment worth making.

To summarize managerial implications, the primary gap missing from this research in understanding the effects of technology in the sales process is the customer perception of virtual communication. The Cisco salespersons all showed understanding of the value that virtual communication brings, and indicates thus that with virtual communication, sales persons can be more efficient, the quality of service increases and the sales process is shortened. All these benefits imply that this is a tradition that appears to be worth undergoing and focusing on, whilst trying to incorporate the main benefits and values from field sales in the virtual sales role.

8.4 Limitations and Future Research

The research was conducted solely with Cisco salespersons, which can be said to not give a fully representative image of the B2B sales process. Moreover, as an IT company, Cisco can be assumed to make use of its video conferencing and data collection and analysis technology in a more efficient way than other B2B companies outside the IT industry. Furthermore, the results may be different in other industries. The IT industry is complex, as there is a lot of components, both virtual/software related and hardware related. Demos and proofs of concepts are an important aspect of the sales cycle, and the solutions sold often contribute to business-critical activities. In other industries, for example in the B2B pharmaceutical industry, virtual communication may perhaps not be desirable because of the high need of trust related to medicines purchased, or because of highly confidential information, for example. It would thus be interesting to understand how the trend towards a larger virtual sales force is impacting business in different companies and different industries.

Conducting the same research but with salespersons from more industries, and a higher amount of respondent may yield more reliable results. The reason for not doing this was to tailor the research specifically to Cisco. Moreover, the lack of a larger group of respondents for the interviews was due to lack of time to conduct these interviews. Furthermore, a limitation can also include the one-sided look at the research statement of how technology has impacted the sales process. This thesis focuses solely on the salespersons side of the sales process, which can be said to not give a full 360-degree view of the situation and the impact of technology on the sales process. The reason for excluding to look at customer perceptions of field versus virtual sales was primarily because of lack of permission to conduct such interviews with Cisco customers.

Further research could thus include the observations, perceptions and experiences of the customers in both field and virtual sales. Understanding how customers respond to virtual salespersons as opposed to field sales persons may yield interesting information related to the effectiveness of communication through video conferencing. It would further be

interesting for future research to look at the effect of technology in B2B sales from a more quantitative point of view, in terms of sales in dollar amounts, and how deals vary between field and virtual sales. Furthermore, a study showing in a quantitative way the benefits of virtual sales, in terms of the number of meetings one can have, the length of the sales process, the sizes of the deals, may bring forth interesting insight into how beneficial virtual sales is.

Researcher bias related to the study is also a limitation that needs to be addressed. I selected the respondents based on who I knew, and who was available for the interviews, but within the criteria that they had been in field and virtual sales. In order to remove the selection bias, perhaps just having more respondents may prove beneficial. Moreover, as the primary and sole researcher of this study with my own expectations of the answers I would receive, researcher bias may have come through in the interview processes. A possibility is that whilst listening to the respondent answers, I may subconsciously have led the conversations to get the answers I wanted to get. This would not have been intentional, however is a realistic possibility. A way of overcoming this would have been to have more than one interviewer, to ensure that there is a balance in the room. Another way of avoiding this to happen would have been to follow a stricter interview-guide.

A last limitation to mention is related to the relationships of the variables in the research model. The quality of the information shared from the use of virtual collaboration is assumed to be higher because of the increase in frequency and the use of IM technology internally. Although no respondent specifically said that these two aspects; IM technology and higher frequency of communication, leads to higher quality of information, it is an assumption that seems reasonable. The same deduction can be made for the connection drawn between understanding of the customer's current situation and needs and how that leads to a more tailored and correct solution. This connection assumes that the salesperson is honest and works with the customer's best interest in mind, with no opportunistic behaviour. Further research into how customer relationship tools impact the quality of the solution provided or proposed to a customer could thus give better insight into whether this is an assumption that can be drawn.

8.5 Conclusion

The B2B sales process has seen major changes in the recent changes, with an increase in focus on virtual sales, and a move from field to virtual sales roles. This change has been seen to have been caused by technological complexity in products (Martin, 2013), the change in demographic, with an increasing number of young professionals in the buying organizations (Shackleton, 2016), and the inability to manage costs in field sales with companies becoming more international (Ingram, n.d). Furthermore, between 2011 and 2013, 46% of participants in a Harvard Business Review study reported shifting from field sales to virtual sales (Martin, 2013). This statistic dating back almost five years may allow for the assumption that the number of virtual sales persons is increasing, with more people transitioning from a field sales role, due to the advances in technology and the benefits that are associated with it.

The fact that virtual sales is increasing in importance seems to be a given, although the effect of this has not been researched enough. This research paper thus looked at how IT has impacted the B2B sales process by looking at how technology solutions are being used in the sales process from a salesperson perspective in field sales and in virtual sales. This research paper revealed several key findings that provide a better understanding of the ways in which communication and relationship between customer and seller are affected by technology as a mediator by looking at sub-variables such as method of communication, frequency, quality of information shared, the type of relationship and the understanding of customer's current situation and needs.

In short, the research showed that virtual sales enables for shorter sales cycles and a higher quality of service. A valuable addition to the research would be to investigate the customer's perception of virtual account managers as opposed to the traditional field sales account manager.

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12. Appendix A - Interview Protocol

Part 1 – Introduction and General Background

Hi! Thanks for volunteering for this interview. I expect this to last around an hour, 1hr ¼, I just want to confirm that this still works for you?

To start, I'd like to say this interview is completely confidential, I will not be using your name nor any personal or identifiable quotes. Only your age, the amount of time you've been in a field role and a virtual role will be used, along with the themes that I uncover from the interview. Is that okay? I will also be recording the interview to ensure that I can properly analyse the data later. After the interviews have been written down word for word, the audio recording will be deleted. Your name will not appear in the transcript. Is this okay? Before we start I'd like to present the structure of the interview. We'll start with general background information, then move on to your experience in field sales, then your experience in virtual sales. After that, we'll move on to your perception of the two and see how they compare. How does that sound?

Do you have any questions before we start? Are you ready to start the interview?

1. How long have you worked with Cisco?
2. How many years have you been working in field sales with Cisco?
3. How long have you been in a virtual sales role with Cisco?

Part 2 – Field Sales

1. What can you tell me about the typical sales process with a customer in a field sales role, based on your experience?
 - a. Probe for inefficiencies as well as benefits of F2F communication
2. How would you describe the communication between you and your customers in field sales?

-
- a. Look for frequency, time spent in meetings with customers, planned vs unplanned meetings/talks
 3. How do you typically find prospects and create leads in field sales?
 4. How do you and your customers typically communicate and plan for meetings?
 5. How often do you typically meet with your customer in a week?
 6. How likely it is that your customer will take contact unexpectedly or out of their own initiative for more information in field sales?
 7. In what phase of the sales cycle does technology play the most significant role in field sales, and why?
 8. What does your relationship with your customers in field sales typically look like?
 9. How would you describe the relationship between you and your customer in field sales?

Part 3 – Virtual Sales

1. What can you tell me about the typical sales process with a customer in a virtual sales role, based on your experience?
 - a. Probe for inefficiencies as well as benefits of virtual communication
2. How would you describe the communication between you and your customers in virtual sales?
 - a. Look for frequency, time spent in meetings with customers, planned vs unplanned meetings/talks
3. How do you typically find prospects and create leads in field sales?
4. How do you and your customer typically communicate and plan for meetings?
5. How often do you typically meet virtually with your customer in a week?
6. How likely it is that your customer will take contact unexpectedly or out of their own initiative for more information in virtual sales?
7. In what phase of the sales cycle does technology play the most significant role in virtual sales, and why?
8. What does your relationship with your customers in virtual sales typically look like?

9. How would you describe the relationship between you and your customer in virtual sales?

Part 4 – Comparison

1. In what ways do field and virtual sales differ the most?
 - a. Follow up with why, or could you elaborate?
2. Specific to virtual sales, what are some of the things that worked best for you?
3. Related to what has worked best in virtual sales from your experience, how does that differ to field sales?
4. Specific to virtual sales, what is something that typically does not work well in your experience?
5. Related to what does not typically work well in virtual sales in your experience, how does that differ from field sales?
6. Specific to field sales, what is something that has worked well in your experience?
7. Related to what has worked well in field sales in your experience, how does that compare to virtual sales?
8. Specific to field sales, what is something that typically does not work well in your experience?
9. Related to what does not typically work well in field sales in your experience, how does that differ from virtual sales?
10. How does use of technology differ from field and virtual sales, from the pre-sale to the post-sale phase?
 - a. Look for/probe for all sales phases
11. Can you give me an example in which your use of technology differed during the sales process between virtual and field sales?
12. What would you say are the advantages of virtually conducting sales?
13. What would you say are the disadvantages of virtually conducting sales?
14. What would you say are the advantages of face to face sales?
15. What would you say are the disadvantages of virtual sales?

Part 5 – Closing

1- Before we finish, is there anything you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?

13. Appendix B - Code Scheme

Communication:

VCO – I: impromptu virtual communication

VCO – P: planned virtual communication

FCO – I: impromptu field communication

FCO – P: planned field communication

CT: communication technology used between customer and seller

CT – VD: communication technology used for communication, using video conferencing solution (WebEx, TP, Spark)

CT – VO: voice communication technology used between seller and customer (Phone, spark voice call)

CO – VA: virtual aids used in communications to enhance the understanding when communicating virtually (PPT, whiteboard function on WebEx, screen sharing)

CO – A: using aids in F2F meetings, such as whiteboards, handing printed documents to customer

CO – SIM: similarities in communication between customer and seller in field and virtual sales

CO – DIFF: relates to a difference between virtual sales and field sales in terms of communication

VCO – PROB: relates to an issue related to virtual communication

VCO – BEN: relates to a benefit of virtual communication

FCO – PROB: relates to an issue related to communication in field sales

FCO – BEN: relates to a benefit of field sales communication

Relationship:

RE – T: transactional – seller interacts with the customer with the sole purpose of closing a deal

RE – A: advisory relationship – seller keeps in contact with customer to see how things are going, how the seller can help

RE – SIM: similarities in relationship between customer and seller in field and virtual sales

RE – DIFF: relates to a difference between virtual sales and field sales which relates to the relationship between seller and buyer

SW – relates to when software is used to gather information on customer