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Study on Sales Practitioners in B2B Companies

Ideal Conception and Practical Challenges of the Job Profile

by

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the presented thesis is to identify the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job, practical challenges faced by sales practitioners in their daily life, and the requirements of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software.

Research Questions: To live up to the purpose, this thesis asks four research questions:

1. What is the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their Job?
2. What are the challenges, sales practitioners of technical companies in B2B markets face today?
3. What are the requirements sales practitioners have towards sales supporting software?
4. What are the possible challenges when using sales supporting software?

Methodology: Adopting an inductive driven approach, empirical answers to the research questions were found using a mixed method research design. Qualitative data gathered from purposefully selected interviewees was coded to form statements. To confirm the qualitatively collected data, a quantitative study was conducted with the sales practitioners.

Findings: The researchers gathered and analyzed a significant amount of data towards the ideal conception as well as the practical challenges of the sales practitioner's job. This concluded in a list of core tasks, desired tasks, and future tasks to be carried out by sales practitioners. In addition, a list of daily challenges faced in the job and requirements towards sales supporting software was developed.

Limitations: As most of the interviewees were senior managers, there might be a chance of biased answers about the processes of their company when answering the questions of the researchers. The study kept a narrow focus on a few industries due to time limitations. A higher diversity of interviewees could have increased the generalizability and validity of the result. Therefore, this thesis also mentions topics for further research.

Practical implications: This thesis sheds light on the ideal conception as well as the practical challenges of sales practitioners. Companies selling technical products in B2B markets can use this investigation to develop and evolve their sales workforce towards the desired goals of their sales organization. Managers in sales organizations can also learn the practical requirements and challenges towards adopting sales supporting software for their companies.

Keywords: Sales, B2B Sales, Technical Sales, Job Profiles in Sales, Challenges in Sales, Sales Supporting Software

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1 Introduction

Selling is one of the five primary activities of a company (Porter, 2008, p. 34). Without selling, a company has no financial resources and can neither survive nor develop. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the pivotal importance of the people who facilitate the sales process: the sales practitioners. Most companies acknowledge this importance but nevertheless struggle to improve the performance of their sales force. For a good reason: there is an endless number of tasks which is conducted by sales practitioners. The intangible profile of the job incorporates a variety of activities from developing technological solutions for customers to tracking deliveries. It remains extremely difficult to identify levers for improving sales performance.

Moreover, sales practitioners face complex challenges where logical explanations fail. A customer might cancel projects without apparent reasons, products might lose demand overnight. Especially when considering the continuously accelerating speed of technology and market development, it becomes apparent that the intangibilities and complexities within the job profile of the sales practitioner are increasing. This awareness points out the need to investigate the job profile of the sales practitioner and the challenges faced by them. Otherwise, it will be serendipity for companies to identify effective measures to develop one of their five most important activities: selling.

1.1 Business to Business Sales of Technical Products

Due to the particular relevance of sales in the business world, selling receives high attention in the academic world, too. Different concepts, trends, and best practices are frequently discussed in the Harvard Business Review and similar magazines. A common term in the literature is ‘Business to Business’ (B2B) sales. The term is used whenever sales activities between two or more companies are addressed. It includes all elements of the supply chain within an industry besides the end consumer. Sales activities which involve the end consumer are summarized under the term ‘Business to Consumer’ sales (B2C). The terms B2B and B2C differentiate sales activities in regard to the customer in the business relationship. The presented thesis focuses on business to business selling of complex, technical products. These complex products require an explanation to the buyer as their cost, quality, and quantity parameters cannot be easily defined (Bajari & Tadelis, 2001). They are sold by companies which are active in high tech industries such as machine building, energy generation, or cloud computing. Despite their technological relevance, these industries represent a major economic force, too. For instance, the five biggest global markets in machine building (China, USA, Germany, Japan, and Italy) accumulated an industry turnover of 1.877 trillion € in 2018 (Statista, 2019). Cloud computing in comparison is a relatively small global market of only 162,9 billion € but expected to grow by 17.5% in 2019 alone (Gartner, 2019). In the opinion of the researchers, the present and future economic relevance in combination with the importance of the products supplied motivate a further investigation about sales in these industries. The general area of research is B2B sales of technical, complex products.

Within this and other areas of research, sales scholars are concerned with topics such as competitive intelligence (Calof, 2008; Hughes, Le Bon, & Rapp, 2013), the identification of buying centres and their members (Grewal, et al., 2015; Trailer & Dickie, 2006) or more interactive buyer/supplier relationships under the influence of social media (Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016; Moore, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2015) The literature written concerning these topics is rather new, too. Even though the topics are extensively analyzed and discussed, the practical challenges caused by such issues for the sales practitioners often remain unclear.

Another aspect of the available research is its deductive character. General trends such as social media are analyzed, and action recommendations for individual practitioners are developed based on these general trends (Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016; Moore, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2015). Contrary inductive approaches in which scholars investigate the tasks which single practitioners consider as relevant for successful results in sales are rather uncommon. The ideal conception of sales practitioners towards their job remains unexplored.

Finally, the implications of improving technology for sales are investigated by researchers. It is described, how the job of sales practitioners might change due to the rise of technologies. Syam and Sharma (2018) predict that new software will at least take away several routine tasks (such as order entry or new product announcement) from sales practitioners. Such new technologies could allow sales practitioners to overcome the challenges they face in their daily work and to focus on the tasks of their ideal conception. Even though the possibilities of such sales supporting software are discussed extensively in various sources, the actual requirements towards the use of this software have not been explored. Also, in adopting new ways of using the software, sales practitioners might face challenges towards these technologies.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the presented thesis is to identify the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job, practical challenges faced by sales practitioners in their daily life, and the requirements of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software.

This purpose is split into three interdependent sub-purposes for easier referencing in further chapters of the thesis.

a) The identification of the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job.
b) The identification of practical challenges faced by sales practitioners in their daily life.
c) The identification of requirements of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software.

Sub purpose a) connects to b) as the ideal conception describes the tasks, which would be performed by sales practitioners in a perfect world. Enabling sales practitioners to perform these tasks solely and to 'focus on the essential' could increase employee satisfaction and the performance of the sales organization. Ensuring that sales practitioners can focus on the tasks of the ideal conception is, therefore, a significant challenge for the sales organization. Sub purpose c) connects to a) and b) as sales supporting software is perceived as a possible solution for the majority of challenges in sales. Describing the requirements, which need to be fulfilled for sales practitioners to use such tools can lead to a faster overcoming of the challenges and enable more focus on the tasks described in the ideal conception. The results of the study cannot only be used by sales practitioners and managers to identify and address challenges in their sales organizations, but also by developers of sales supporting software to tailor their products to the needs of sales practitioners.

To live up to these purposes, the presented study asks four research questions:

1. What is the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job?
2. What are the challenges, sales practitioners of technical companies in B2B markets face today?
3. What are the requirements sales practitioners have towards sales supporting software?
4. What are the possible challenges when using sales supporting software?

1.3 Definitions

The researchers want to ensure that readers and authors maintain a shared understanding of the key expressions used to answer the research questions above. Therefore, keywords are briefly explained hereafter.

Challenges: Challenges are related to processes and tasks inside the sales organization and can, therefore, be fixed by the sales organization itself. One exemplary challenge could be, that the sales practitioners of an organization spent most of their time with writing offers. The researchers are explicitly not dealing with external challenges such as a strong competitor with a competitive advantage as this cannot be remedied by the sales organization of a company.

Sales organization: A sales organization describes the group of people which is representing the company in the marketplace by dealing with the needs of potential and existing customers.

Sales practitioner: The person who is responsible for the face to face contact with the customer.

Technical products: Technical products (or solutions) are products which require explanation to the buyer. Sales practitioners involved with such products have to translate complex technical product characteristics into values added to the buyer. These products can be found in industries such as automation technology or robotics.

Researchers: Researchers refers to the authors conducting the presented thesis.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The *first chapter* gives an introduction to the topic, an overview of B2B sales, and the purpose of the thesis. The *second chapter* investigates the literature and describe several challenges and trends in sales. The *third chapter* explains how an inductive research approach is utilized to find empirical answers to the research questions. Based on the insights from the literature and the implications of the methodology, *chapter four* develops and presents a topic guide for qualitative interviews. Throughout the chapter, the results of the conducted interviews with sales practitioners are presented. Later in *chapter four*, a quantitative survey based on the statements from the interviews is developed to confirm or neglect the information gathered in the interviews. The findings from the interview and the survey are discussed in *chapter five* to answer the four presented research questions. The thesis is concluded in *chapter six* by comparing the results of the survey to the purpose of the study.

2 Literature Review

The previously presented research questions are answered through the analysis of information gathered in interviews and surveys (see chapter 3). High informational quality for the analysis is ensured by presenting suitable questions to interviewees and survey participants. These suitable questions address current and relevant issues. To find these current and relevant issues, the researchers reviewed the literature. At the end of this chapter, the researchers present a list of issues which are discussed by scholars in sales. This list of existing knowledge allows the researchers to ultimately fulfill the purpose of this thesis of identifying practical challenges in sales and requirements for sales supporting software. The questions for the empirical studies are developed based on the list at the beginning of chapter 4.

2.1 Trends and Challenges in Sales

The first section of this chapter is concerned with trends and challenges in sales. The literature which addresses these topics is used to develop questions for the qualitative study which connect to the first two research questions (Ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job and practical challenges). To reference the findings in later chapters of the thesis, the researchers labeled them in order of appearance (L1, L2, etc.). In some cases, a sales scholar discusses two connected topics in a single source. In these cases, the findings are presented under one headline (compare: L5 & L6).

L1: Competitive Intelligence

Indeed, there are many things that happen in the environment of a company. Be it about competitors, customers, or authorities. By utilizing intelligence, a company can transform knowledge about these events into practical tasks and develop and sustain a competitive advantage (Calof, 2008). To do this successfully, all members of the organization as well as their networks must contribute their information to competitive intelligence. Sales practitioners are active in the market and can, therefore, provide customer insights, competitors, new products, promotion strategies, etc. (Hughes, Le Bon, & Rapp, 2013). This makes them extremely valuable for setting up competitive intelligence. Furthermore, Hughes et al. (2013) claim that sales practitioners with high skills in gathering and utilizing such data can serve their customers better, are able to establish a good product perception and generate more sales revenue in general. Collecting and archiving this data becomes especially relevant as some sales practitioners might perceive their customer information as bargaining power within the organization (Trailer & Dickie, 2006).

L2: Expansion of Product Portfolios

Trailer and Dickie (2006) pointed out several challenges for sales organizations. By surveying 1275 sales managers in 2006, they aimed to figure out what challenges sales organizations face today. A first challenge was found in 85% of the respondents stating that their company has expanded in terms of the product portfolio, product complexity, and markets. Still, customers require in-depth technological information and arguments to justify the purchase of each product. Keeping up with such expansions is a challenge for sales practitioners.

L3: Digital Information Technologies

Digital information technologies become especially relevant when considering the shift in the information asymmetry (Trailer & Dickie, 2006). Today customers are better informed than ever. In some cases, customers consider themselves so well informed about a company's offerings, that they do not perceive a need for a personal meeting with a sales representative. Especially the advancement of digital information technologies (DIT) foster this trend. Through DIT, buyers can access, store and manipulate data relevant for their business operations (Grewal, et al., 2015). One practical implication for this is that more than 70% of buyers start their buying process with google research.

L4: Digital Manufacturing Technologies

Considering another trend, the digital manufacturing technologies (DMT), the power asymmetry tilts even more to the buyer. Through DMT, such as design software or 3D printers, buyers become able to get desired products without the support of suppliers (Grewal, et al., 2015). In combination with DIT, a wide array of solutions can be identified, downloaded, and transferred from the digital into the physical. In practice, this could result in buyers just downloading the 3D drawing of a mechanical component and manufacturing it themselves. Such constellations could lead to buyers avoiding the buying process – and therefore the sales representative – completely (Grewal, et al., 2015).

L5 & L6: Global Sourcing and Sales Transformation

The buyer power is further increased as an increasing number of company's sources globally (Grewal, et al., 2015). This leads to sales organizations dealing with a small number of big customers responsible for a major share of a company's turnover. These buyers tend to seek relationships with their suppliers beyond simple sales transactions. Collaborative relationships, in which seller and buyer cocreate unique solutions, are demanded (Grewal, et al., 2015). To enable such approaches, suppliers and their sales organizations need to understand networks inside their customer's organization, differentiate their products (technically and argumentative) better, and improve their knowledge about the customer.

L7 & L8: Solution Selling and Self Education

Levihn and Levihn (2016) discussed that the crucial element for selling individualized solutions to customers' problems is the relationship between supplier and buyer. The soundness of the relationship and the supplier's location in the professional network are indispensable for selling technological solutions in B2B markets. Strong relationships with clients lead to effective communication, and barrier over competitors (Levihn & Levihn, 2016).

Further, Levihn and Levihn (2016) discussed the importance of training and educating the sales practitioners to build the desired targets of B2B relationships for selling and solving problems for the customer. Moreover, McQuarrie (2014) discussed the importance of regular customer visits to know the required processes at the client's side for the target product development, business development, and enhancing client relationships (McQuarrie, 2014).

L9: Social Media as a Sales Channel

Social media fosters this trend from transaction to relationship. According to Moore et al. (2015), the relationships between seller and buyer are today more interactive (Moore, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2015). This has been supported by the increasing use of social media such as Facebook or LinkedIn (Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016). Through such channels, the sales representative can share information with their networks and encourage discussions about specific business topics. But to transform these discussions and networks into business performance, social media must be augmented by further functions of the company (Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016). Therefore, Rodriguez et al. (2016) proposed four implications for sales management when integrating social media into the sales process. First, management has to create awareness of the companies social media goals and the way customers should be engaged. Second, the sales process must be clearly defined to identify powerful leverages for using social media (third). Fourth, potential costs and time constraints must be identified and factored in when evaluating sales costs.

L10: Buying Centers

A further challenge is a change in decision making at customers. Buying centers with several stakeholders with different interests have replaced single individuals as decision makers (Trailer & Dickie, 2006; Grewal, et al., 2015). This concludes into an increase in large sales circles (more than seven months for a decision to buy) and a decrease in short sales circles. These prolonged sales cycles demand another attitude from sales practitioners. Instead of a clear focus on numbers and results, they must be able to engage into a continuous process of improvement with the customer to achieve a status as a partner (Trailer & Dickie, 2006).

L11: Importance of Sales Processes

Furthermore, Trailer and Dickie (2006) discovered that companies who emphasized their sales process perform more successful than those who do not. By monitoring the sales process and adapting it to market changes, companies improve significantly in areas such as targeting prospects, qualifying leads or presenting benefits. As more sales organizations recognize these benefits, more sales practitioners need to follow such processes and their adaptations.

L12: Routinized Exchange Relationships

Grewal et al. (2015) refer to another new process which concerns sales practitioners: routinized exchange relationships (RER). Whenever the demand for goods or services exchanged between two companies becomes predictable and consistent, systems can start buying from systems. Standard tasks like ordering, receiving, or paying for products are conducted without human intervention. Sales practitioners can set the frame for implementing such routinized exchange relationships. This includes thresholds for human intervention, monitoring the process, or adding new products to the existing RER agreement (Grewal, et al., 2015).

L13: Decline of Simple Sales through Sales Practitioners

Syam and Sharma (2018) take the implications of technology one step further by segmenting sales into three categories and predicting the future impact of technology on these categories. The first category (standard products, easy to understand, low margins) is likely to be completely automated in the future. There are no more sales practitioners involved. The second category (products & services with high margins, information easily accessible to the customer) will see heavy influences of especially AI technologies, too, as buyers tend to access information through devices and systems and not through humans. Technology is still seen as an enabler for sales practitioners. The third category (big buying centers, information not accessible) will see the least influences of technology (Syam & Sharma, 2018).

L14: Non-Selling Time

Sales practitioners are preferred to be at customer sites for meeting the company's revenue targets by constantly educating customers and developing the required solutions with clients. In doing so, the expense of keeping the sales practitioners in the field is increasing day by day. According to Wedell and Hempeck (1987), 60% or more of the sales practitioner's time is spent on overdue tasks such as traveling, getting the right appointments, carrying out paperwork (writing offers, payment confirmation, etc.), administration tasks, and holding meetings (Wedell & Hempeck, 1987).

Ledingham, Kovac, and Simon (2006) also talked about the 'non-customer-facing time' of sales practitioners to be more than 50% of their total working hours. These non-productive tasks include administration work, transit time to customers, etc. (Ledingham, Kovac, & Simon, 2006).

2.2 Adoption of New Technologies

Todays and tomorrows sales practitioners have to cope with the previously described challenges and trends. The most promising approach for overcoming such issues is to use technology. Computers are enhancing our mental capabilities just as the steam engine did with muscular power (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 7). Therefore, the researchers address sales supporting software in the presented studies. The third and fourth research question (requirements towards sales supporting software and challenges with the use of sales supporting software) address this matter in a practical way: how should technology be designed to be used and appreciated by sales practitioners. To investigate these topics, researchers aim to ask the study participants precise questions. To identify these precise questions, the literature concerning software requirements and challenges has been reviewed briefly.

L15 & L16: Technology Training and Perception of Technologies

In the near future, simple products will be sold on an e-commerce website such as Amazon without any human interaction. According to Siau and Yang (2017), the marketing and sales field is evolving rapidly with advancements in technologies using AI and machine learning. Hence, sales practitioners should continuously receive training and on the job workshops to keep themselves updated and efficient to carry out target sales. Apart from gaining knowledge about new technologies, sales practitioners need to be better at creativity and innovation in today's world (Siau & Yang, 2017).

Jones, Sundaram, and Chin (2002) discussed how the behavioral intentions of sales practitioners affect the direct relationship with adopting and infusing technologies in their sales routine. The Sales practitioners's decision is affected by their perception of the advantages these technologies can bring to their sales target as well as their innovativeness (Jones, Sundaram, & Chin, 2002).

L17: Usability and Integration with Existing Systems

Any system developed to enhance productivity should be trouble-free to learn and use. Further discussing the functionality and usability, Fjermestad and Romano Jr (2003) argued that usability leads to the overall functionality of a system by making it available to clients and, in turn, easing the effective utilization of the systems. Moreover, new technologies like electronic customer relationship management systems should integrate with ease with all the existing technologies in a firm. This will continue to increase usability and effectiveness (Fjermestad & Romano Jr, 2003).

2.3 Overview of the Findings from the Literature

By developing questions for the qualitative study based on the presented findings, the researchers want to identify practical challenges faced by sales practitioners in their daily life, the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job, and the requirements of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software. The findings from the literature are used as 'hooks' to anchor precise questions which contribute actively to achieving the purpose of the thesis. To summarize the chapter, the presented findings are listed below. The referencing tags (e.g. L1) are used in chapter 4 and chapter 5 to show, which question was established based on the distinct finding from the literature.

- Competitive intelligence (L1)
- Expansion of product portfolios (L2)
- Digital Information Technologies (L3)

- Digital Manufacturing Technologies (L4)
- Global sourcing (L5)
- Sales transformation; from transaction to the relationship (L6)
- Solution selling (L7)
- Self-education of sales practitioners (L8)
- Social media as a sales channel (L9)
- Buying Centers (L10)
- Importance of Sales Processes (L11)
- Routinized Exchange Relationships (L12)
- Decline in simple sales through sales (L13)
- Nonselling time (L14)
- Regular technology training (L15)
- Negative perception of new technologies (L16)
- Usability and Integration with existing systems (L17)

3 Methodology

The methodology chapter discusses the selected methods of research in this thesis. These methods are the researcher's means to accomplish the purpose of the study to determine the ideal conception and challenges faced by sales practitioners. To answer the research questions, the researchers used an exploratory, inductive approach. A qualitative study, using extensive interviews, explored the perceptions of sales practitioners. Afterwards, a quantitative study was carried out to verify the interview findings.

3.1 Research Approach and Strategy

The thesis follows the inductive research approach. The inductive study swifts "from the more specific to the more general" (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 26). In the context of this thesis, the researchers aim to get generalizable answers to the research questions by examining the opinions and perceptions of individuals.

The researchers started by collecting information by reviewing the literature. This information served as a base for developing questions for a qualitative study. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016, p.29), a suitable method for qualitative data collection is the interview. Interviews can deliver rich data, aligned to the researched contextual uniqueness of the individuals studied. To ensure the successful conduction of the interviews, the researchers constructed a 'topic guide' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018) based on the previously gathered knowledge from the literature. The topic guide contains a series of open-ended questions which enabled the researchers to undertake semi-structured interviews. The findings from these interviews are structured with the coding.

To generalize and verify the findings, the mixed method technique was selected. In this technique, both qualitative and quantitative studies were used as the research questions can not be answered by one study alone (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 106). The quantitative study presents the findings from the interviews in the form of a self-completion survey.

The results from the two studies are combined in the analysis. This analysis is based on grounded theory. One core element of grounded theory is the constant comparison of qualitative and quantitative data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 98). In the thesis (chapter 5), a continuous comparison was made between the new quantitative survey data with the previously collected qualitative data from interviews to compare the fit. In the procedure of constant comparison, disconfirming cases also play a significant role in rendering categories (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 98)

The results of the analysis of the two studies are generally valid answers to the initially presented research questions. These answers have been developed throughout the process of examining individuals. This completes the inductive research approach.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

This section elaborates on the methods which were used for collecting qualitative and quantitative data. This includes a further description of the methods, sample selection and the conduction of the respective studies.

3.2.1 Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data collection was the prime source of information in the thesis. For the primary source of research, the authors decided to go for a literature review to form a scientific base to develop the 'topic guide' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018). The topic guide contains a series of questions which were covered during the interviews. These questions were based on academic literature and the four research questions. The researchers used means such as Google scholar search and Lund University LUBsearch to find reliable and influential academic papers and research topics.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted aimed to acquire understanding from the sales practitioners' outlook and viewpoints towards the research purpose (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018). The pivotal advantage of the semi-structured interview is the open design of the method. Open-ended questions allow the researchers to explore a wide variety of topics. On the one hand, this includes the issues addressed in the topic guide. On the other hand, interviewees can elaborate on matters which are practically relevant but not covered by the topic guide.

Sampling for Interviews

To identify interviewees, which could contribute practically relevant and experience-based data, the researchers chose the judgment sampling method. "Judgment sampling involves the choice of subjects who are most advantageously placed or in the best position to provide the information required" (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 248). Hence, the following aspects were considered for the selection of the interviewees through judgment sampling:

Firstly, aiming at the research purpose, professionals who are engaged in B2B markets selling technical products or solutions were selected as appropriate candidates. The researchers searched for interviewees involved with companies active in industries such as automation technology, robotics or IT. This selected group of individuals was regarded to have a proper understanding and outlook towards the phenomenon being researched. Secondly, the researchers aimed to ensure the accessibility of the interviewees by restricting the geographical area of the study to Sweden or Denmark. This restriction furthermore allowed the researchers to complete the study in the given time frame. Thirdly, the interviewees were individuals with first-hand experience in sales (more than ten years) or sales management.

It must be pointed out, that judgment sampling reduces the generalizability of the study as the researchers define the criteria for selecting the interviewees. However, this design is redeemed as the best choice for extracting the required data "from very specific pockets of people who alone possess" it (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 248).

Interview Conduction

The semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the topic guide. The discussions were initiated by a series of general questions about the interviewees' company to create a trustful and communicative atmosphere. The researchers did not always stick to the set open-ended questions from the topic guide to enable the interviewees to answer freely and uninterrupted. All interviewees were met in person or via video calling. Each interview was audio recorded with the consent of the respective interviewee. The audio records were used for archiving the data and developing transcriptions for the later analysis. Due to request of the interviewees, the interviews were anonymised and only presented in extracts.

3.2.2 Quantitative Data Collection

In addition to the qualitative study, researchers conducted a quantitative data collection. The tool used for quantitative data collection was a multiple-choice-questionnaire with questions based on the qualitative data collected in the expert interviews. The most beneficial feature of the quantitative survey is the sheer quantity of data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018, p. 306). In the adopted mixed-method approach along with grounded theory, quantitative data played the role of comparing, confirming, and validating the qualitative data for making the research more generalizable and valid.

Self-Completion Questionnaire

The self-completion questionnaire discussed by Easterby-Smith et al (2018) is one of the common ways to design a quantitative study. The questionnaire developed in this study was designed according to the structure of the topic guide and the results from the qualitative study. The survey started with informing participants about the objective of the study. Afterward, the participants had to answer a series of closed questions. The opinions of the participants towards a certain statement were captured using the Likert Scale (totally agree - totally disagree). Moreover, an open question at the end of each section formed a base to share additional opinions about the study objectives.

Sampling for Survey

To identify suitable participants for the self-completion questionnaire, similar sampling criteria as for the qualitative study were applied. The researchers focused on the same criteria as aforementioned, excluding the ten years of experience parameter. Hence, study participants were required to be working in B2B sales of a company involved with technical products based in Sweden or Denmark. A suitable sample of study participants was found during the attendance of the industry fair 'Plastteknik Nordic 2019' on the 8th and 9th of May 2019. The sales practitioners present on the fair were involved with the technical sales of plastic machines or raw materials.

Questionnaire conduction

All questionnaires were completed in the presence of the researchers during the previously introduced industry fair. The presence of the researchers contributed to building trust with the participants by assuring them the purpose of data collection and its confidentiality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018). During the fair, researchers visited the exhibition booths of distinct companies and asked their sales practitioners to complete the questionnaire in paper form. To validate the participant as a suitable member of the sample, business cards were collected.

3.3 Data Analysis and Quality

This section provides an overview of the methods used for analyzing the data of the two studies. The individual results of the mixed method approach are presented in chapter 4. The results are linked with each other and are discussed in chapter 5.

Qualitative Data Analysis

According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016, p.332), qualitative data analysis is not a straight-way task but "rather a continuous and iterative process" (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 333), and there are no set of defined rules. Due to the large quantity of data, the information was transcribed, and each interview was analyzed by coding, which is an analytical process where the collected data is "reduced, rearranged, and integrated" into relevant categories (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 334).

In the process of coding the information from the interviews, the structure of the topic guide was used. The researchers looked for patterns and connections between the questions asked and answers received. To identify the patterns and connections, the researchers codified the responses of interviewees and counted the frequency of specific answers throughout the series of interviews conducted. However, researchers were aware that coding of qualitative data requires frequent revision. Therefore, the categories were regularly adjusted by comparing and reviewing the information the whole time of the data analysis (Thomas, 2013).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Sekaran & Bougie (2016, p.273) mention several techniques that can be utilized for evaluating quantitative information. Since researchers decided to use the quantitative survey to confirm the qualitative findings, the number of potential techniques were reduced. Hence, the empirical data of comparatively small size from surveys were analyzed and presented using Microsoft Excel. The numerical data presented by the closed-ended questions were summed up by their frequencies to present as illustrative statistics.

Qualitative Data quality

For the success of collecting qualitative data during research, the interviewers need to project "professionalism, enthusiasm and confidence" (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 117). Accordingly, the researchers established the credibility and rapport with the interviewees before and while conducting the qualitative interviews.

By accepting the fact that the multiple social verities exist, researchers had increased the credibility of the study by selecting the mixed method approach. This approach builds upon collecting data from various dimensions by using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018). To establish further credibility, the two researchers conducted the interviews together with appropriate documentation. In addition, one of the researchers was asking the questions whereas the other was taking notes and making sure that all the target topics were covered during the interviews. For the purpose of transcription without errors, these interviews were recorded on interviewees' permission.

Throughout the interviews, researchers motivated the interviewees for giving unbiased responses by establishing rapport through diminishing the suspicions, concerns, and anxieties respondents may have had about the study and its outcomes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 117). For this purpose, researchers had started all the interviews with broad questions about the interviewees' organization, sales units, and revenue turnovers. Later during the interviews, respondents were given enough time to think and reply to the questions related to specific areas.

Quantitative Data Quality

The initial survey was handed out to the colleagues with a sales background in the MiM program to check the quality and accuracy in general of the questionnaire. Researchers used the feedback received to fine-tune minor details.

To ensure the validity and reliability of data, the survey respondents had to be sales practitioners in the B2B market dealing with sales of technical solutions. Therefore, a bigger audience was targeted during the fair. While conducting the survey, researchers made sure that they reached out to sales practitioners after interacting and collecting their business cards. Also, researchers captured the survey participants responses using a Likert scale as it is a less biased approach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 216). To increase the confidence and enthusiasm of participants and to impart reliability on data, researchers used the name and logo of the university, name of the program, and project title.

3.4 Limitations of the Methodology

It might be tough to follow the exact research process as the environment of the project was dynamic and complex. Researchers tried to stick to the transparent procedures of the steps, but it was impossible to lock the social setting (Lofland & Lofland, 1971, p. 33). Judgemental sampling techniques allowed to select suitable interview candidates. Due to the limited access and time to conclude the study, researchers subjectively selected interview candidates from the limited industries they are aware of.

The main restriction for the face-to-face interview was the geographical restraints. During the study, researchers conducted one interview through a telephone call, due to the limited resources of time to travel to Stockholm. To minimize possible adverse effects on the evaluation, the two researchers discussed and transcribed the interview to maintain two-sided view on the outcomes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 119).

Another limitation of face to face interview might be that participants might be biased about the practices and processes of their company in reality. However, researchers tried to build the desired atmosphere of trust and confidence to fetch fully unbiased answers during the interviews. For future research, researchers have mentioned the relevance and topics of study in chapter 6 Conclusion.

4 Research Findings

This section explains the topic guide used for conducting the semi-structured interviews, and later reports the qualitative data the researchers identified when interviewing sales practitioners based on this topic guide. Furthermore, the researchers present the quantitative survey which was developed based on the qualitative data collected during the interviews. Finally, the results of the quantitative survey are shown.

4.1 Topic Guide

The previously identified outputs from the existing literature were analyzed to come up with the topic guide. The topic guide as presented below is divided into six containers of questions. Through these containers, the researchers aimed to identify answers to the four research questions from multiple perspectives. An explanation of the connection between the containers and the research questions is given in this section.

Research Question 1: What is the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job?

The first research question is answered by the three containers- 'core tasks', 'desired tasks' and 'future tasks'. The first container explores the interviewee's perception of the core tasks of a sales representative. These core tasks are the foundation of the ideal conception. The ideal conception is further complemented by the questions asked in the next containers.

The next container 'desired tasks' explores the tasks, which the sales practitioners would like to carry out under ideal conditions. These desired tasks are the tasks, which offer (in the perception of the interviewee) great value in sales but cannot be carried out as sales practitioners are concerned with performing the core tasks and overcoming daily challenges.

The third container- 'Future tasks' explores the tasks which are according to the interviewee's perception relevant for sales practitioners in ten years. These tasks complete the ideal conception and increase its long term desirableness.

These three containers connect to sub-purpose a) of the thesis to determine the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job. It is essential to mention that the tasks which diverge from the ideal conception can be treated as the practical challenges in sales as these engagements keep a sales representative from carrying out the absolute required tasks.

Research question 2: What are the practical challenges, sales practitioners of technical companies in B2B markets face today?

The fourth container, ‘Challenges in Sales’ is a direct and crucial topic for exploring the challenges for sales practitioners by answering the research question above. Interviewees were asked, which tasks keep them away from pursuing the ideal conception of the sales job they described in the first three containers.

Research Question 3: What are the requirements sales practitioners have towards sales supporting software?

The fifth container, ‘Requirements for Sales Supporting Software’ explores the essential demands towards sales supporting software. These requirements could be the contents, interface needs, or the usability of this software. The exciting findings of this topic are presented later in this chapter which fulfills the study purpose of determining the necessities towards adapting and using this software by sales practitioners in their daily job.

Research Question 4: What are the possible challenges when using sales supporting software?

The sixth container, ‘Challenges in using Sales Supporting Software’ aims to explore possible challenges which sales practitioners perceive when working with such software tools. This container of the topic guide directly linked to the purpose of the study to identify the probable challenges of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software.

Table 1 shows the topic guide with the six containers. The third column shows the findings from the literature which are the basis for asking the respective question in the second column. This shows the link between the literature review in 2.3 and the topic guide. Note: The first container of the topic guide is marked as container number 0. This container includes general introduction topics to increase the engagement of interviewees.

Table 1: Topic Guide

Container	**Questions**	**Literature Connection**
No. 0: Facts and Figures	**Personal Introduction**	Topic of General Discussion
	Turnover Last Year	
	Turnover Growth last Year in %	
	Size of local Organization (overall Employees)	
	Size of local Sales Organization (overall Salespeople)	
	Sold Products	
	Typical Customers	
No. 1: Core Tasks	**Describe the perfect day in the life of a sales representative?**	
	Convincing the Customer	L3, L6
	Visiting Customers	L6

	Developing Solutions with the Customer	L6, L11
	Self-Education	L2
No. 2: Desired Tasks	**Promising Tasks which you always wanted to do (because they offer great value in sales)?**	
	Archiving Customer Information	L1, L5
	Inform Customers	L2, L3, L7
	More Customer Visits	L6
	Relationship building with Customer	L6
	Use CRM or Sales Management Software	L1
No. 3: Future Tasks	**Which tasks will be added to your schedule in the future?**	
	Networking	L5, L6
	Developing Partnerships	L6
	Feeding Sales Management System	L1, L2
	Solution Selling through Relationship	L6
No. 4: Challenges	**What is taking time of your clock? / Why can you not entirely focus on selling?**	
	Administrative Tasks: Writing Offers; Checking Payments	L14
	Configuring Products	L14
	Getting Appointments	L14, L6, L10
	Tracking Progresses	L14
	Meeting Preparation	L14
	Qualifying Contacts	L10
	Reporting and Review	L14
	Traveling	L14
Let's assume that there will be technology able to do these tasks...		
No. 5: Software Requirements	**What would make you buy and implement such a solution?**	
	Integration into existing Systems	
	Usability	
	Availability on different Interfaces	
	Easy Data infeed	L1
No. 6: Software Challenges	**What are the issues when having such solutions in place?**	
	Anxiety of losing the Job	L10
	Continuous training and development of practitioners	L13
	Action determined by Technology	L1, L3, L4
	Restricting creativity	L9
	Personal Change- Motivation, Perception	L14

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The aforementioned sampling methods allowed the researchers to identify and interview five sales practitioners. It should be noted that all of them added not only with at least ten years of sales experience to the result of the study, but they also presented valuable information from previous, international sales experience. In addition to four interviewees who were directly involved with selling technical products in markets such as automation technology or professional tools, a sales trainer was included in the study, too. She was included based on her knowledge in the field of sales, B2B markets, and her association with sales managers in the concerned technical companies.

The details of the interviewees have been kept anonymous. Hence, the researchers refer to the interviewees by the introduced labeling system (I1, I2, etc., see Table X, column 3). Table 2 contains a short presentation of the participants of the interviews.

Table 2: Interview Participants

Company	**Position**	**Name**	**Country**	**Date**	**Language**
Beckhoff Automation	Managing Director	I1	Sweden	03/29/2019	English
Beckhoff Automation	Technical Sales Skane Area	I2	Sweden	03/29/2019	English
Atlas Copco AB	VP Marketing	I3	Sweden	04/09/2019	English
Techtronic Industries Nordic AB	Managing Director	I4	Denmark	04/16/2019	English
Prestera Utbildning	Owner	I5	Sweden	04/26/2019	English

Through this study, a vast pool of data was gathered to answer the research questions. This qualitative method gave the researchers a rich spectrum of findings to answer the research questions in chapter 5. The qualitative statements from the interviewees were the pivotal source of information for the thesis. They allowed the researchers to gain knowledge and details about the context and phenomenon under research. To find similarities within statements of the interviewees, the researchers transcribed the interviews and scanned the text for patterns. Similar statements were grouped under one headline (compare coding chapter 3.3). Overall, 41 statements were made by the interviewees in response to the topic guide. The statements are shown in the Table 8 in the Appendix. Hereafter, the researchers present a summary of the answers of the interviewees grouped according to the containers of the topic guide previously introduced.

4.2.1 Container One: Core Tasks of Sales Practitioners

The questions included in the first container of the topic guide aim to investigate the interviewees understanding of the ideal conception of the tasks of sales practitioners. Our interviewees described overall eight different core tasks for sales practitioners. The most strongly consented task for a sales representative is to visit customers. Almost every interviewee expressed their thoughts on the relevance of visiting the clients.

"I would spend my entire day in front of customers, discussing their problems, solving their issues, presenting our best solution to them; So my best core task is spending time in front of customers" (I2)

"I see my sales team to be always beside the distributors and end customers, presenting the tools and the other solutions we have got in our portfolio" (I4)

I3 emphasized on the importance of customer visits by stating, *"I think people do not realize the importance of spending customer facing time in the world of selling technical products, I have always advised my sales people to get along with clients for achieving sales and quality targets"*.

The second most prominent core task discussed by interviewees was the significance of educating the customer about the products, and solutions being sold to them. Within the time spent in front of the customer, sales practitioners should aim to *"teach the customer about the value which is added through using our various tools, different solutions for meeting their production, quality or other organizational targets"* according to I3. This core task about 'educating the customer' was discussed in detail during the interviews. Researchers got the practical knowledge that this task is vital for the success of the type of companies being studied in the B2B market.

On the contrary, some of the core tasks researchers mentioned in this study were discussed by a few interviewees. These tasks are considered in the list of core tasks as they were given emphasis and importance during the interviews conducted. I4 who is in charge of a sales organization involved with selling professional tools – stated: *"The most important thing as a sales representative is: plan the day ahead, have a plan to use the extra time when things go faster or meetings get canceled"*. Moreover, an entirely new dimension was added to the discussion by I5. As a sales trainer, she is educating her customers about the psychological aspects of sales and emphasizes strongly, that sales practitioners have to study this matter.

4.2.2 Container Two: Desired Tasks of Sales Practitioners

The next container is further building up the idea of the ideal conception of the sales job as it is concerned with 'Desired Tasks' of sales practitioners. The researchers asked the interviewees to imagine an ideal world for their sales organization. Accordingly, the interviewees stated the additional tasks which would be done more in this ideal world compared to the actual status quo. The interviewees described overall eight different desired tasks for sales practitioners.

Noticeably, no desired task was stated by more than two interviewees. One task which I4 desires his sales organization to perform is to *"look at opportunities to increase the range of products we sell to one customer"*. This task is about increasing the turnover generated with single customers by selling different types of products. This thought was also discussed by I3.

"I always look into my sales team and ask myself- 'why are they just stuck to a limited number of products when we have hundreds of other products that could be of use to our clients, and to us- it will help our revenue targets at each customer" (I3)

Moreover, I5 and I3 were concerned with improving the internal connections between Salesforce and other functions of the company. In their opinion, sales practitioners should seek more cooperation with departments such as marketing or product management:

"In the future, all the concerned departments involved in the solution sold will work together as a team in front of the customer, whether it's marketing, product managers, and like that. […] *This will help us to reach out effectively to customer's problematic area with a solution"* (I3)

Whereas I1 added a dimension of self-awareness to the desired tasks. He wants the members of his salesforce to know what they are good at and focus their efforts on doing this:

"Sales people should understand their talents and work according to them. Some are very good at hunting and convincing new customers of our products. Others are very good at caring about the needs and wishes of existing customers […] *doing both in parallel usually does not work out so well."*

4.2.3 Container Three: Future Tasks of Sales Practitioners

The third container is concerned with 'future tasks' for sales practitioners. The researchers asked the interviewees to imagine the job of a sales representative in the future (ten to fifteen years) and describe the most critical coming tasks. Our interviewees described the overall seven different future tasks for sales practitioners. Even though the researchers asked for tasks in sales, a significant number of interviewees independently stated, that the task of 'simple product selling' will not be performed by sales practitioners in the future. In I4's opinion, this will change the job of the sales representative in the following manner:

"In the future, Customers will already know everything you are going to present to them through the web. The role of the rep as someone who explains features, prices, and arguments why something should be bought is vulnerable. Basically, a customer will be paying for the rep to present information the customer can't find out himself."

To provide the information which customers cannot find themselves, sales practitioners have to spend even more time on educating themselves and explaining products with increasing complexity to the customer. According to I1, it will be *"challenging to handle and understand the technology we sell in the future"*.

Whereas, I5 added a timely perspective to the future tasks of sales practitioners: *"*[Sales practitioners need to] *Be immediate and direct in contact with the client. The customer wants to get hold of the sales person right now the moment he is calling"*.

4.2.4 Container Four: Challenges of Sales Practitioners

This container is concerned with direct challenges faced by sales practitioners that hinders them from doing the tasks mentioned in the ideal conception of sales. 'Challenges in sales' reduce the time available to pursue the previously described ideal conception. Our interviewees pointed out overall six different challenges tasks for sales practitioners. Noticeably, all of the interviewees independently faced issues with qualifying information. This includes information about sales leads, customers, and decision makers:

"Qualifying the important decision makers inside an organization […] Solutions cannot be sold when there is no contact with the important people in the customer's organization." (I2)

"Sometimes we spend days and months trying to win a customer, but our sales guys forget the importance of knowing the one, the one who is going to decide for the buying, the one who is called decision-makers at customer ends" (I3)

"When you try to win new customers, it is a very time-consuming task to find out what are the important leads which my sales guys can convert into a successful business " (I1)

'Self-education about products' was also an important challenge for a considerable number of interviewees. The expanding range of product portfolios and the increasing technical complexity of products demand frequent learning from sales practitioners. It was evident in the following statements:

"Our extended arms - distributors are realizing the fact that they cannot sale unless they are equipped with the thorough knowledge of almost all the products we are selling them [...] This is not just ours but also the requirement of end customers using our tools" (I4)

"Sales practitioners at Atlas Copco spend several hours per month on self-education about our products. The product portfolio is quite wide and it is challenging for sales practitioners to keep themselves updated" (I3)

One obvious and straightforward issue was only pointed out only by I2. He stated that he uses a significant share of his daily time for traveling from one customer to another. Even though the time in the car is available to carry out phone calls, it could still be spent better in front of the customer.

4.2.5 Container Five: Requirements towards Sales Supporting Software

The questions included in the fifth container of the topic guide aimed to investigate the interviewees' requirements towards the use of sales supporting software in their sales organization. The interviewees described the overall seven different requirements for sales supporting software. Noticeably, a significant number of interviewees independently stated that this software should provide high 'reliability of results'. Sales practitioners described the demand for a reliable result as follows:

"The software or technology should be proven […] reliable and validated. I would like to test these technologies with existing customers where I have a good relationship already so there is no risk of losing the customers" (I2)

"The software should provide valid and smart data which our sales reps could rely upon. This data could be the requirements of the customer, the best selling price for the offer, etc." (I3)

Another important, yet unique requirement was stated by I1 while saying, *"above all, the software has to be in line with GDPR to be used"*. Further interviewees did not mention these possible legal issues with collecting and analyzing data from customers. The researchers considered this requirement worth describing in the study.

4.2.6 Container Six: Challenges of Sales Supporting Software

The last container is concerned with identifying challenges towards using the sales supporting software. The interviewees described overall three implications the use of sales supporting software could cause for their sales organization. Noticeably, a significant number of interviewees independently stated, that 'technologies enable more efficient sales'.

Especially with increasing width and depth of product portfolios, I4 is convinced that *"The more help a rep gets, the happier the rep will be as there is more time for selling"*.

I3 also sees these technologies as a helping hand for his sales team:

"I see these technologies as my and my sales team helping hands in the future. If sales people get some benefits out of it, they will surely make these technologies part of their daily job."

I2 also sees the value of such technologies in what they can do for customers: *"I look at these technologies and ask myself about the benefits for my customers"*. On the other hand, he anticipates blind trust in the output of a sales supporting software as an issue: *"Sales guys have to be critical towards the output of the software. Customers may want something else than a standard black box solution"*.

4.3 Questionnaire Development

A quantitative survey complemented the previously introduced findings from the interviews. This increased the solidity, and the generalizability of the study as the results of the qualitative data collection is confirmed or neglected by a bigger audience. The bigger audience was available to the researchers as they attended an industry fair. During the fair, exhibitors and visitors were asked the sales practitioners to complete the survey.

The researchers did not include the entire list of statements from the qualitative study in the quantitative study (survey). The selection was made based on the mentioning of a certain statement by multiple interviewees as well as the urgency with which the interviewees made a statement. The main reason for excluding statements which were rarely mentioned in the interviews, was the response rate of the quantitative study. Presenting a very extensive questionnaire to be answered during a busy industrial fair could have discouraged possible participants from taking part in the study. Nevertheless, the researchers added three statements which were mentioned by only one interviewee each as they emphasized on the high importance of the respective statement during the interviews:

- I2 for the fourth container (challenges): *Sales practitioners spend much driving/traveling*
- I5 for the second container (desired tasks): *Sales practitioners should devote more time to understanding the psychological aspects of sales*
- I5 for the second container (desired tasks): *Sales practitioners should spend more time using social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) as a support tool for sales*

In total, this resulted in 34 closed questions and six open questions. The closed questions offered the respondent five options to mark with a cross (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') and provided numerical data for the researchers. The open questions were asked to enable a "greater level of discovery" (Gillham, 2000, p. 5). All questions were arranged according to the container and section of the qualitative finding they derive from. The questionnaire is shown in the Figure 1 in the Appendix.

4.4 Quantitative Findings

The researchers analyzed the data from the survey by accessing the relative number of votes per statement. Whenever 50% or more of all participants strongly disagreed/disagreed with a statement, the statement was treated as rejected. Whenever 50% or more of all participants strongly agreed/agree with a statement, the statement was treated as approved. If neither 50% approve nor 50% rejected a statement, the statement was treated as indirectly rejected. 24 active or former sales practitioners responded to the quantitative survey during the fair. The results of the data collection are shown in Table 3 below. A detailed version can be reviewed in the appendix in Table 9.

The numbering of the statements (Sx) shown in column 2 of Table 3 are used throughout the remaining thesis to reference the statements.

Table 3: Result of the Qualitative Study

	No.	Statement	Result
RQ1: Ideal Conception			
Core Tasks	S1	Sales representatives should visit customers	A
	S2	Sales representatives should educate customers	A
	S3	Sales representatives should solve daily issues at customer (delivery times, service cases etc.)	IR
	S4	Sales representatives should always aim to sell a solution, not a product	A
	S5	Sales representatives should build relationships with customers	A
	S6	Sales representatives a should influence the customers buying decision	A
Desired Tasks	S7	Sales representatives should spend more time on seeking business intelligence (customers, markets, competitors etc.)	A
	S8	Sales representatives should spend more time on increasing the range of products sold to a single customer (more cross selling)	A
	S9	Sales representatives should spend more time on using the CRM system	IR
	S10	Sales representatives should spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management, etc.)	A
	S11	Sales representatives should spend more time on developing and selling solution to their customers	A
	S12	Sales representatives should spend more time on understanding the psychological aspects of sales	A
	S13	Sales representatives should spend more time on using social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) as a support tool for sales	IR
Future Tasks	S14	In future, sales representatives will not deal with simple products	A
	S15	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating themselves (because products get more complex)	A
	S16	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating their customers (because products get more complex)	A
	S17	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management etc.)	A
	S18	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on approaching end customers	A
	S19	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on using sales supporting software	IR
RQ2: Challenges			
Challenges	S20	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with qualifying customers	A
	S21	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with qualifying leads	A
	S22	Sales representatives spend a lot of time qualifying decision makers at customers	A
	S23	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with educating themselves about the products they sell	A
	S24	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with solving issues for customers (delivery times, service issues)	A
	S25	Sales representatives spend a lot of time driving	A
RQ3: Reuirements for Sales Supporting Software			
SW Requirements	S26	New tools must integrate into the existing software environment seamlessly	A
	S27	New tools must provide information about the customer (prices, contacts, used solutions)	A
	S28	New tools must be available on different platforms	A
	S29	New tools must be in line with data protection agreements	A
	S30	New tools must always produce reliable results	A
	S31	New tools must be self-explanatory	A
RQ4: Challenges with Sales Supporting Software			
SW Chal.	S32	Sales representatives will value new tools as a help for their work	A
	S33	New tools will replace the personal relationship between sales representatives and customers	R
	S34	Sales representatives must be critical towards the results produced by new tools	A

The table clearly shows that the respondents confirmed the vast majority of the statement made by the interviewees. 29 out of 34 statements were approved by the sales practitioners as 50% or more ‘agree/strongly agree’ upon them (“A”). The sales practitioners rejected four further statements according to the previously introduced 50% rule. Nevertheless, it can be argued that these questions did not find direct rejection. In sum, the ‘agree/strongly agree’ answers with the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ answers concluded for 50% or more of the answers in the four cases of indirect rejection (“IR”). Only one statement was directly rejected (“R”). This was expected as the researchers changed the original statement for control purposes from ‘New tools will never replace the personal relationship between sales practitioners and customers’ to ‘New tools will replace the personal relationship between sales practitioners and customers`. By rejecting the antithesis with more than 50% of participants ‘disagreeing/strongly disagreeing’ with the statement, the original statement can be seen as confirmed. Furthermore, it indicates that the participants read the questions instead of marking random answers.

5 Discussion

The researchers conducted two empirical studies (qualitatative and quantitative) throughout this thesis. To conclude the thesis, the results of the two studies are discussed and combined to present answers for the research questions from chapter 1.2. Each research question is addressed by a discussion of the respective containers from the interviews (qualitative study) and surveys (quantitative study). The researchers have grouped the statements according to underlying motives and assumptions. For example, the two interview statements “Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with qualifying leads” and “Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with qualifying customers” were addressed under the collective heading “Qualifying related challenges”. Throughout the discussion, researchers refer to findings from the literature (L1, L2, etc.) and statements (S1, S2, etc.) according to the lists introduced in chapter 2 and chapter 4.

To be noted: The presented findings represent only the opinions of the sales practitioners who took part in the two studies. All references to sales practitioners in the following chapters are solely concerned with the individuals who took part in the studies. The opinions of the five interviewees from the qualitative study are highly influential as their statements were made to develop the quantitative study. Participants of the quantitative study received the opportunity to give clear answers, too. Still, their main task was to state their degree of consent with the prepared statements.

5.1 Research Question One: What is the Ideal Conception of Sales Practitioners about their Job?

The first three sections of the two studies identified the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job. Core tasks in sales, desired tasks in sales, and future tasks in sales have been investigated. Nineteen statements were made by the interviewees and assessed by the survey participants in response to the questions asked within these three containers. Hereafter, the researchers present the statements structured by the containers of the studies and grouped according to underlying motives. The chapter concludes with the presentation of the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job.

5.1.1 Core Tasks

After reviewing the findings from the two studies, the researchers have developed a list of six core tasks that the sales practitioners are performing in their jobs. For instance, 100% of the survey respondents agreed on visiting customers as one of their core tasks. The further findings are grouped into three groups for readers to understand the discussion better.

Administrative Tasks (S3)

The core task for solving daily issues for customers was rejected in the quantitative study conducted. Only 46% of sales practitioners (S3) agreed in the survey on resolving customer issues as a core task which was supported only by the two interviewees (I1, I2). The disapproval towards such administrative tasks resonates with the scholars Ledingham, Kovac, and Simon (2006) who discussed the 'non-customer-facing time' as a challenge in sales (L14).

Customer Relationship Tasks (S1, S5, S6)

Three of the core tasks identified and approved by the empirical studies address the relationship between sales practitioner and customer. A first and obvious measure to create and foster this relationship is visiting the customer. From interviewees to survey participants, 100% of the study participants stated that the sale practitioners' core task is to visit customers (S1). This also resounded with the studies from McQuarrie (2014), and Levihn and Levihn (2016) who explained the importance of customer visits as critical for carrying out a company's objectives towards product development, relationship building, entering new markets, and customer satisfaction.

Corresponding with this, the statement S5 describes relationship building itself as a core task for sales practitioners which was approved by 100% of survey participants. This assessment is in line with scholars (Grewal, et al., 2015; Jones, Sundaram, & Chin, 2002) who refered to a stable relationship between supplier and customer as a prerequisite for co-creating unique solutions and products for the success of the customer's business. The information gathered through the close exchange with the customer can be used to influence the buying decisions of the customer, too. 83% of survey participants agreed to statement S6 which describes influencing of the customers buying decision as a core task for sales practitioners. This is an interesting functional task that researchers came to know more about during the interviews with sales practitioners rather than while conducting a literature study.

The emphasis on the customer relationship is - considering the participants of the empirical studies - not surprising. Participants such as I1 and I2 (both automation industry) are engaged in industries with strong interdependencies between buyer and supplier. Buyers need the security, that suppliers can support them with the cutting-edge automation technology over time frames up to decades to maintain a strategic advantage. Vice versa, suppliers are dependent on the purchasing power of big customers and carry out significant efforts for example to develop customized products. Establishing a close relationship with frequent and open exchange is in the interest of both parties within the industries of the study participants.

Customer Binding Tasks (S2 + S4)

Sales practitioners have the possibility to increase their success in addition to building a strong relationship. Measures which bind a buyer to a certain supplier have proven effective in this case. Consequently, 71% of the participants agreed to the findings of the qualitative study (S2) that the sales practitioners core task is educating customers about their products and solutions. I3 discussed the importance of this education in increasing future sales and organic growth. Investing time on providing the right education to the right person inside the customer's organization is therefore perceived as a powerful tool to achieve continuous awareness of the supplier. This awareness creates a binding towards the supplier.

Another strong approach to create lasting customer binding is selling solutions. By selling solutions to customers, the switching costs for the customer to another supplier rise significantly in comparison to the switching costs in the scenario of single product sales. Especially when the supplied solutions take an important position in the buyer's value chain, a changeover to another supplier becomes even less likely. The participants of the studies acknowledge the importance of solution selling by approving S4 (sales representative should always aim to sell a solution) with 79%.

Conclusion on Core Tasks

The administrative tasks being performed by sales practitioners are adding to their non-selling or non-customer facing times, therefore they were rejected by the survey participants and are not part of the ideal conception. Sales practitioners described the significance of focussing on relationship building and binding customers by selling solutions, visiting customers regularly, influencing their buying decisions, and educating the customer about the solutions offered.

5.1.2 Desired Tasks

The researchers aimed to uncover tasks for sales practitioners which are perceived as valuable but cannot be performed as the available time is covered by carrying out core tasks and dealing with the daily challenges. Overall, the interviewees stated seven different desired tasks which they would perform more often in an ideal world. Interestingly, the survey participants showed more undecidedness when rejecting or confirming the seven statements. This showed in up to 42% of survey participants stating that they neither agree nor disagree with a certain statement in this container. Two desired tasks appeared to be so unique, that they could not be grouped with other tasks. S10 (increased collaboration with other departments) and S12 (understanding the psychology of sales) remain in the category 'ungrouped'. Still, both statements received approval by the survey.

Increased use of Technology (S7)

A first interesting result was the rejection of two statements (S9, S13) which described the increased use of technologies in sales as desirable. Moreover, only 33% of the survey participants agreed that sales practitioners should spend more time using social media as a sales tool (S13). Rodriguez, Ajjan, and Peterson (2016) describe the increasing importance of social media platforms in sales. This issue (L9) seems to be irrelevant for the sales practitioners which took part in the quantitative study. A possible explanation for such results could be age and industry environment of the study participants. Most of the participants are active in industries in which selling is rather personal and linked to close relationships (see 'core tasks'). Replacing the vital human component in their sales process through Instagram or Facebook could appear to them as a rather uncommon idea.

In another case, only 42% agreed, that sales practitioners should spend more time using CRM systems and rejected this matter, too. In contrast, the general importance of seeking business intelligence (S7) was acknowledged by interviewees and confirmed by survey participants. This resonates with sales researchers such as Hughes et al. (2013) who stated that sales practitioners with high skills in gathering and utilizing such data can serve their customers better (L1).

Desired Selling Activities (S8, S11)

High approval rates in the survey were received by statements which pointed out distinct selling activities as desired tasks for sales practitioners. Sales practitioners would like to spend more time on increasing the range of products sold to one customer (S8, 71% approval) and on developing and selling more solutions (S11, 79%). This would support researchers such as Levihn and Levihn (2016), too. They claim, that a close relationship between supplier and buyer is the foundation for selling solutions (L7). Discussing the solution with the customer would not only improve the relationship and the knowledge about the customer. It would also increase the quality of the solutions offered to the customer.

Conclusion on Desired Tasks

Overall it turned out, that sales practitioners are less interested in using certain technologies. Their strongest desire is to spend more time on developing their success with possible and existing customers.

5.1.3 Future Tasks in Sales

The researchers identified future tasks for sales practitioners. Altogether, the interviewees described seven different future tasks which sales practitioners foresee as relevant in ten to fifteen years from now. It is interesting to state that 55% of survey participants were not sure whether they would use sales supporting software in the future as a tool to help in their sales jobs. Further statements can be classified into two groups. The first group contains statements which predict changes in sales. The second group deals with the increasing importance of education in sales.

Change of Sales (S14, S17, S18, S19 + S10)

A first significant change to sales in the future could be the disappearance of 'simple sales'. This type of sales is concerned with simple products which do not require any explanation to the buyer. Several interviewees stated, that these products will be exchanged through computer automated routinized exchange relationships in the future (S14). Only 17% of the survey participants opposed this statement which also resonates with sales scholars such as Siau and Yang (2017) (L13). This reaction on S14 is rather unsurprising as most study participants are already today focusing on complex products and solutions. This shift became even more apparent when the researchers reviewed some of the business cards collected during the quantitative study. The survey participants carry job titles such as ‘Solution Architect’ or ‘Technology Consultant’ instead of the classical ‘Sales Representative’. Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged, that the content of this statement (S14) correlates strongly with the statements S4 and S11 from the previous two containers. Concluding from this, developing and selling solutions for and with the customer takes a very prominent position in the ideal conception of the study participants.

Another future change in the job of the sales practitioner is the increased focus on end customers. 63% of the participants in the quantitative study agreed to this statement (S18) made by I4. Especially in the business I4 is involved with (industrial tools), it appears to be vital even today to create a strong market pull by convincing end customers. The suppliers of the end customers can choose between several options. By ensuring that end customer demand a certain product from their suppliers (through specifications or listings), sales organizations can secure their own turnover. As the sales organization of I4 utilizes distributors and dealers to sell their product, the end customer approach seems to be especially relevant for such business models.

The internal reorientation of sales practitioners could represent the last change in sales. The conducted studies emphasize strongly on the future importance of internal collaboration with other departments of the company (S17) which correlates strongly with statement S10 from the previous container. Only 4% of the participants in the quantitative study opposed to this statement which was given by I2 and I3. Both described the high need for exchanging information with other departments such as marketing or product management. On the one hand, their motivation is to update actors in their own organization about the situation of the customer. This ensures for example, that new products get developed according to the demands of the market. On the other hand, sales practitioners are perceived as communicational elements who need to get the right information from inside their own organization to the customer. Especially when considering the increasing complexity of products, it appears to be essential to consult with internal experts to provide the right services to the customer.

Education (S15, S16)

The increasing complexity appears to be not only a reason for more collaboration with other departments, but it also raises the importance of education and training in sales. The study participants emphasized on the future importance of educating oneself as well as the customers (S15, S16). Both statements were approved by the empirical study which resonates strongly with the findings of sales scholars such as Levihn and Levihn (2016) who described education as a pivotal matter in sales, too. I1 stated that the people in his sales organization are required to be engineers as a strong technical education is the most promising base to sell automation products to customers. The explanation of incredibly complex, almost scientific products to buyers without a technical background appears to be a critical future factor in several industries, too.

Conclusion on Future Tasks

Researchers found and confirmed that the sales practitioners realized the need for training and educating their customers as well as themselves in the future. Collaboration with other departments will be a crucial task in the future, too. Furthermore, several aspects of today's sales job might change: the study participants predict that sales practitioners will focus more on solutions and less on simple products in the future.

5.1.4 Conclusion on Research Question One

The ideal conception of the sales practitioners who were involved in the two studies is presented below (Table 4) in the form of tasks which sales practitioners want to carry out in the present as well as in the future. The table further shows, which statements (S1, S2, etc.) from the studies establish the respective task within the ideal conception. In some events, two or three statements with congruent content are summed up in one task.

Table 4: Ideal Conception of Sales Practitioners about their Job Profile

No.	Task	Statement
1	Sales practitioners want to educate customers	S2, S16
2	Sales practitioners want to sell solutions	S4, S11, S14
3	Sales practitioners want to visit customers	S1
4	Sales practitioners want to build relationships (with customers)	S5
5	Sales practitioners want to influence buying decisions	S6
6	Sales practitioners want to do more cross selling	S8
7	Sales practitioners want access more business intelligence	S7
8	Sales practitioners want to collaborate more with other departments	S10, S17
9	Sales practitioners want to understand the psychology of sales	S12
10	Sales practitioners want to approach end customers	S18
11	Sales practitioners want to educate themselves and customers	S15, S16

With this list, managers in sales organizations in similar industries such as the investigated ones can assess and realign the activities of their sales organization. Every activity which is carried out and not part of the list can be treated as a challenge which lowers the efficiency of the respective sales organization. Sales managers have to ensure that their teams focus on these tasks and these tasks can be completed as efficiently as possible. In the case of e.g. task number 7 (seeking more business intelligence), a sales organization could establish systems and mechanisms, which allow their sales practitioners to gain maximum insight into market intelligence. At the same time, these systems should require as little input from the sales practitioners as possible. This would allow sales practitioners to seek business intelligence while having a maximum of time available to focus on further tasks of the ideal conception.

5.2 Research Question Two: What are the Challenges, Sales Practitioners of Technical Companies in B2B Markets face Today?

The second research question aims to identify the challenges, which hinder sales practitioners from pursuing the tasks stated in the ideal conception. This section represents the investigation of the reality in sales. Three major groups of challenges related to self-education, overhead tasks, and qualifying information were identified. The quantitative study approved all the challenges stated in the qualitative study.

Self-Education Challenges (S23)

A topic which is already present in answer to the first research question is the self-education of sales practitioners about the products they sell (S23). Even though 38% of the participants in the quantitative study were neutral towards this challenge, it was approved by the majority of sales practitioners. This resonates not only with the previous tasks within the ideal conception, but it also matches with the findings of researchers such as Levihn and Levihn (2016). As the study participants work in fast-changing industries, it is unsurprising that a significant amount of time has to be invested in maintaining and refreshing knowledge about products. The issue increases further when considering the continuous expansion of product portfolios documented by the sales scholars Trailer and Dickie (2006). It appears that sales practitioners are in high need of tools, which allow them to acquire the necessary knowledge about products at the right time.

Overhead Challenges (S24, S25)

During the interview, I2 identified a unique challenge of driving and traveling as an indispensable overhead challenge for sales practitioners working in B2B markets. This finding (S25) was in line with the outcomes of the survey (67%) as well as resonates with the research conducted by the sales scholars mentioned in the literature survey (Wedell & Hempeck, 1987) (L14). Considering that several participants of both studies are responsible for sales areas such as entire Skane and travel up to 150 km by car to visit single customers, the approval of this statement was rather unsurprising. Also, the participants of the quantitative study approved further non-productive sales tasks such as solving general issues for customers (support cases, deliveries) as a challenge (S24).

Qualifying Related Challenges (S20, S21, S22)

When interviewing the sales practitioners, the main challenge they discussed was qualifying customers (I1, I2, I3, I4). Sales practitioners need to determine the right customer and to develop an understanding of the client's organization. The quantitative study (S20, 71%) confirmed this challenge as demanding and time-consuming. In the same accord, all interviewees and 79% of the participants in the quantitative study confirmed the qualification of leads (S21) as a challenge in their job. It is essential to mention that the sales representative spend a significant amount of time on prioritizing leads according to their business potential (I2, I3, I4). After identifying the most promising leads and the most rewarding customers, it is a further challenge to identify the right decision makers inside the customer's organization. Scholars such as Grewal et al. (2015) have previously addressed this topic of buying center analysis, too. 79% of the quantitative study participants confirm this issue as a significant challenge for sales practitioners (S22). It is important to discuss, that the decision maker could be an organization, a group of individuals or a single person. In companies selling complex products, a sales representative interacts with multiple stakeholders such as users, purchaser, or administrative personnel during sales (Trailer & Dickie, 2006; Grewal, et al., 2015).

Conclusion on Research Question Two

The challenges faced by the sales practitioners who took part in the presented studies are displayed in Table 5 below. The table also shows, which statements from the study establish the respective challenge.

Table 5: Daily Challenges for Sales Practitioners

No.	Challenge	Statement
1	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with qualifying customers	S20
2	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with qualifying leads	S21
3	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time qualifying decision makers at customers	S22
4	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with educating themselves about the products they sell	S23
5	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time with solving issues for customers (delivery times, service issues)	S24
6	Sales practitioners spend a lot of time driving	S25

This list can be used by consultants, software developers, and sales manager to develop solutions for the distinct challenges. First and foremost, it appears to be extremely relevant to support sales practitioners in qualifying customer related information. Three out of six challenges focus on this topic. It appears to be a huge challenge in general for sales practitioners to prioritize which customers and persons they should approach to perform successfully. Each sales organization facing the prioritizing issues could, for example, investigate financial, relationship-based or image-based qualification criteria. This could enable many sales practitioners to focus more on the tasks they assess as valuable for the success of their sales organization (compare 'ideal conception').

5.3 Research Question Three: What are the Requirements Sales Practitioners have towards Sales Supporting Software?

The researchers tried to uncover the study participant's requirements towards sales supporting software by asking them to describe their 'perfect' software. This perfect software would allow them to focus their work on the tasks described as the ideal conception and assists to overcome the challenges. Several aspects of the perfect sales supporting software were stated in the interviews and confirmed by the quantitative study. The statements are categorized into three groups: reliability, usability and law compliance.

Reliability (S30)

Most approvals were given to the statement, that a sales supporting tool must always produce reliable results (S30 mentioned by three interviewees and agreed upon by 92% of the survey participants). There might be several reasons for this need. I2 stated that he wants to use the information from such software only when working with well-established contacts. Otherwise, he sees the danger of losing new customers due to providing them false information. This statement shows that sales practitioners have a strong need to appear as professional as possible. There is limited room for failure as wrong information towards the customer is perceived as a threat to the business relationship. This leads to further recognition: software utilizing upcoming technologies such as artificial intelligence increase in reliability over time (as they only learn from practical cases fed into the system). Sales practitioners might not be willing to work with a certain tool over a long period when the early outcomes are not useful. Especially when considering the previously mentioned overhead tasks in sales, it is unlikely that sales practitioners will use additional time in teaching software the important aspects of their sales job.

Usability (S26, S28, S31)

The reliability of the software and several further aspects contribute to the usability of the software. 58% of the survey participants agreed to the statement that a software tool should be self-explanatory (S31). In the case of two further statements, each time 83% agreed, that new software tools must be available on different platforms (S28) and that they must integrate seamlessly into existing software environments such as ERP systems (S26). Fjermestad and Romano Jr (2003) addressed these aspects of usability as well. Furthermore, it shows that the way a software gives access to information is equally important as the information itself. At least 3 out of 6 requirements for sales supporting software made by the interviewees were concerned with usability questions (integration, explanation, availability). The high importance of usability can therefore not be neglected.

Law Compliance (S29)

However, the software works or appears, it is important that the underlying concepts and ideas - especially when dealing with data collection and storing - are in line with data protection agreements. This statement (S29) by I1 was confirmed by 87% of the survey participants. It might increase in importance when considering that today's sales organizations usually work across country borders and face divergent legal environments in different countries. Ensuring continuous compliance of data collection and processing methods integrated into a sales supporting software with local law might be a very relevant challenge for providers of such tools in the future.

Conclusions Research Question Three

Table 6 below shows the requirements of the participants of the two studies towards sales supporting software. The statements from the studies which establish a specific requirement are shown in the right column.

Table 6: Requirements towards Sales Supporting Software

No	Requirement	Statement
1	Seamless integration into existing software environments	S26
2	Detailed access to customer information (prices, contacts, used solutions)	S27
3	Availability on different platforms	S28
4	Compliance to data protection agreements	S29
5	High reliability of software outputs	S30
6	Self-explanatory character of software	S31

These answers to research question three can, for example, be used by developers of sales supporting software to tailor their products to the needs of the customer. Furthermore, this list allows buyers of such software to develop a vague idea of the criteria which a suitable sales supporting software has to fulfill.

5.4 Research Question Four: What are Possible Challenges when using Sales Supporting Software?

The last research question of the thesis addresses potential challenges which could be caused by the use of sales supporting software. Only three statements were made regarding this matter. The reason for this low response rate could be that the study participants do not perceive sales supporting software as something challenging at all due to their technical backgrounds. I1 described in this way: *"Being an engineer, I always see technology as a friend"*. The three statements are classified into two groups.

Perception of new Technologies (S32)

Previous scholars pointed out that sales practitioners are strongly influenced by their perception of new technologies when integrating them into their sales routine (Jones, Sundaram, & Chin, 2002). The overall perception of sales supporting software was rather positive. Several interviewees stated that they perceive sales supporting technologies as an added value to their work (S32). 75% of the survey respondents agreed to this statement. This shows, that sales practitioners are generally open to using new software. Nevertheless, it has to be considered, that the interviewees and the survey respondents are all employed in companies selling a technical product (automation technology, tools). This fact is likely to contribute to the openness towards new technologies.

Importance of Personal Contact (S33, S34)

Even though the sales practitioners embrace technologies which support their work, they take the view that personal contact with the customer cannot be substituted by a software (S33). Three out of six interviewees and 54% of survey respondents support this view even though it was stated and confirmed, that the job of the sales representative will change in several areas, too (see 'future tasks'). Furthermore, sales practitioners naturally have an interest in the high importance of personal contact in sales as this is an important aspect of their profession. The continuous importance of human involvement in sales is pointed out again by the statement that sales practitioners need to remain critical towards the outputs of sales supporting software (S34, approved by 59%). According to I2, these outputs might not be in line with what the customer needs.

Conclusion on Research Question Four

Table 7 below presents the 'challenges' which the participants of the two studies perceive with using sales supporting software. As the perception of the technology was very positive, the original description for the findings (challenges) was put into quotation marks. Furthermore, the statements from the study which establish the distinct challenge are shown.

Table 7: Challenges of Sales Supporting Software

No.	'Challenge'	Statement
1	Sales supporting software will be valued as a help for the job of the sales practitioner	S32
2	Sales supporting tools cannot replace the personal relationship between buyer and seller	S33
3	Sales practitioners must be critical towards the results produced by sales supporting software	S34

Overall, the participants of the presented study perceive sales supporting software as a helpful addition to their work. The researchers could not find evidence that sales practitioners are anxious about losing their relevance due to new technologies. Nevertheless, the list presented above could still be used by other researchers to investigate, if other industries perceive technology in a similar way.

6 Conclusions

The final chapter of this thesis concludes the previously described findings and relates them to the purpose of the study. The researchers present how their study accomplished the purpose of the thesis, give practical recommendations based on the findings, show the limitations of the study, and state implications for the future research.

Purpose Accomplishment

The Purpose of this study was initially split up into three sub-purposes. Hereafter, the researchers present how the study accomplished each sub-purpose.

The first sub-purpose of the study is the identification of the ideal conception of sales practitioners about their job. The topic achieved significant attention in the study as three out of six containers in the study focused on the ideal conception. The researchers were able to accomplish this purpose by identifying eleven tasks on which sales practitioners want to focus today or in the future. This includes core tasks the practitioners are already conducting today such as visiting the customer or selling solutions. Additional desired tasks were also identified. Activities such as seeking more business intelligence were stated by the study participants but cannot be carried out as of today due to a lack of time. Sales organizations could for example set up systems which allow sales practitioners easy access to market intelligence without demanding significant effort from the user to allow more focus on these desired activities. The ideal conception of sales practitioners concludes with the identification of future tasks in sales. Sales practitioners stated, which activities they identify as crucial for success in their job in ten years from today. For example, the increased focus of sales activities on end customers is one task which takes a pivotal role in the future according to the study participants. Especially when considering the last sub-purpose of the thesis addressing sales supporting software, it was interesting to recognize that the sales practitioners actively opposed to statements which described an increased use of sales supporting software.

The second sub-purpose of the study is the identification of practical challenges faced by sales practitioners in their daily life. During the empirical study, six challenges were identified that hinder sales practitioners from pursuing the tasks mentioned in the ideal conception of a sales job. Tasks related to qualifying customers’ information are very crucial for sales organizations. These tasks could be to identify the decision maker or qualifying leads. Another interesting challenge found in the research is that the sales practitioners are investing their time driving from customer to customer. These identified practical challenges take a substantial amount of customer facing time from the sales practitioners. Once sales practitioners have a solution for dealing with daily practical issues, they would focus more on achieving the ideal conception for their organization's success.

The last sub-purpose of the thesis was the identification of requirements of sales practitioners towards sales supporting software. The researchers lived up to the sub-purpose by identifying six requirements towards sales supporting software. Several rather practical requirements were stated by the study participants. It appears to be important, that sales supporting software produces reliable results which do not lead to misinformed customers. The usability of such software tools was mentioned as an additional requirement. This includes a self-explanatory interface and the availability of the software on different platforms. To add further knowledge, the researchers explored challenges that sales practitioners could face using sales supporting software. It was interesting to recognize that the study participants did not perceive upcoming software tools as a threat to their job profile. Moreover, they stated, that software would be highly valued as a support of the sales practitioner.

To sum up, the conducted study allows the reader to gain an overview about the perceptions and opinions of sales practitioners in technical companies about their ideal conception of the job, the challenges they face, and the requirements they set towards sales supporting software. This accomplishes the purpose of the thesis. Even though the sample sizes could be enhanced to produce more diverse and generalizable answers, the chosen mixed method approach allowed the researchers to develop reliable answers to the research questions.

Practical Implications

This study presented real-life challenges of sales practitioners to organizations selling technical products and solutions in B2B markets. Companies can use this investigation to develop and evolve their sales workforce towards the desired goals of the organization. Management in sales organizations can also learn the practical requirements and challenges towards adopting sales supporting software for their companies. This study can be used as a tool to prepare a sales force better than before for the present as well as for future goals.

Research Limitations

During this study, some limitations were identified. Irrespective of introducing the research topic before the start of each interview, it cannot be fully proved that the interviewees got all the concepts of the research in the same way as researchers did. As most of the interviewees were senior sales managers in their respective organizations, there might be a chance of biased answers about the practices and processes of their company. However, for the authenticity and reliability of data, researchers built the desired atmosphere of trust and confidence to fetch fully unbiased answers during the interviews.

Due to time limitations, the researchers kept a narrow focus on the industries they were familiar with before the conducted research. This concluded in selecting interviewees from industries such as heavy machine building and automation technology. A higher diversity of interviewees could have increased the generalizability and validity of the result. Also, the study experienced a low number of valuable participants, which lead to an increased weight of the statements made by the actual participants.

As this research studies the subjective practicalities, it is inappropriate to generalize the findings far beyond the investigated industries. Nevertheless, researchers believed that they had gained important and wholesome inputs towards the analysis of the research questions.

Future Research

The study introduced more maturity to the existing knowledge about sales practitioners in the respective industries. As the technologies are continuously evolving, there are opportunities and needs for future investigations of the ever-changing sales organizations. Future research could aim to increase the diversity and generalizability of the findings of this thesis. Firstly, a large group of interviews could be incorporated to overcome the aforementioned limitations in the qualitative sample size. This would verify and evaluate this study research and will gather a final statistic for sales practitioners. Secondly, future research could conduct more quantitative surveys to validate the qualitative data found in this study under the realities of other markets.

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Appendix

Table 8: Statements from the Qualitative Study

No.	Task	Container
1	Visiting Customers	Core Tasks
2	Solve daily Issues of Customers	
3	Sell Solutions	
4	Build a Relationship	
5	Educate Customer	
6	Influence Customers	
7	Challenge Customers	
8	Plan and prepare Visits	
9	Gather information	Desired Tasks
10	Self-education about market and products	
11	Increase range of products sold to a customer	
12	Match talents with tasks	
13	Use CRM	
14	Collaborate with other stakeholders	
15	Solution selling	
16	Work with high decision makers	
17	Use Social Media as a Support Tool for Sales	
18	Learn about the Psychology of Sales	
19	Sell more, and more complex products	Future Tasks
20	Focus on end customers	
21	Vanishing of simple product sales	

22	Educating customers and themselves	
23	Collaboration with other stakeholders	
24	Partner up with decision makers	
25	Use software as support	
26	Solving Issues of Customers	Challenges
27	Qualifying Leads and Customers	
28	Self-education about Products	
29	Qualifying Decision Makers inside the Customer's Organization	
30	Configuring solutions	
31	Driving	
32	Integration with existing software systems	Software Requirements
33	Provide customer intelligence	
34	Availability on different platforms	
35	In line with GDPR	
36	Coordinate internal capacity	
37	Reliability of results of technology	
38	Technology needs to be self-explanatory	
39	Technologies enable more efficient sales	Software Challenges
40	Relationship to customer makes sales rep irreplaceable	
41	Being critical towards information from technology	

Figure 1: Questionnaire for Quantitative Study

Challenges For Sales Representatives In Technological Business To Business Companies
Lund University - Masters in Management 2019 - Degree Project

*In your opinion: what are the **core tasks** of a sales representative?*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Sales representatives should visit customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should educate customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should solve daily issues at customer (delivery times, service cases, etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should always aim to sell a solution, not a product	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should build relationships with customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should influence the customers buying decision	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments

*In your opinion: what **do** sales representatives spend their time on? (unproductive sales tasks)*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on qualifying customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on qualifying leads	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on qualifying decision makers at customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on educating themselves about the products they sell	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on solving issues for customers (delivery times, service issues, etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives spend a lot of time on driving/travelling	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments:

*In your opinion: what **should** sales representatives spend more time on?*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Sales representatives should spend more time on seeking business intelligence (customers, markets, competitors, etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on increasing the range of products sold to a single customer (more cross selling)	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on using the CRM system	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management, etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on developing and selling solution to their customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on understanding the psychological aspects of sales	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives should spend more time on using social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) as a support tool for sales	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments:

*In your opinion: what **will** sales representatives spend their time on in future?*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
In future, sales representatives will not deal with simple product sales	o	o	o	o	o
In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating themselves (because products get more complex)	o	o	o	o	o
In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating their customers (because products get more complex)	o	o	o	o	o
In future, sales representatives will spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
In future, sales representatives will spend more time on approaching end customers	o	o	o	o	o
In future, sales representatives will spend more time on using sales supporting software	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments:

*In your opinion: which **requirements** must be fulfilled by a software supporting sales to be used by you?*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
New tools must integrate into the existing software environment seamlessly	o	o	o	o	o
New tools must provide information about the customer (prices, contacts, used solutions, etc.)	o	o	o	o	o
New tools must be available on different platforms	o	o	o	o	o
New tools must be in line with data protection agreements	o	o	o	o	o
New tools must always produce reliable results	o	o	o	o	o
New tools must be self-explanatory	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments:

*In your opinion: what **challenges** could arise when using a software tool supporting sales?*

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Sales representatives will value new tools as a help for their work	o	o	o	o	o
New tools will replace the personal relationship between sales representatives and customers	o	o	o	o	o
Sales representatives must be critical towards the results produced by new tools	o	o	o	o	o

Additional Comments:

General Comments:

Thank you very much for your help!

Table 9: Detailled Result of the Quantitative Study

	No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Result
RQ1: Ideal Conception								
Core Tasks	**S1**	Sales representatives should visit customers	0%	0%	0%	21%	79%	**A**
Core Tasks	**S2**	Sales representatives should educate customers	4%	0%	25%	42%	29%	**A**
Core Tasks	**S3**	Sales representatives should solve daily issues at customer (delivery times, service cases etc.)	13%	17%	25%	25%	21%	**IR**
Core Tasks	**S4**	Sales representatives should always aim to sell a solution, not a product	0%	4%	17%	33%	46%	**A**
Core Tasks	**S5**	Sales representatives should build relationships with customers	0%	0%	0%	13%	88%	**A**
Core Tasks	**S6**	Sales representatives a should influence the customers buying decision	0%	0%	17%	54%	29%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S7**	Sales representatives should spend more time on seeking business intelligence (customers, markets, competitors etc.)	0%	0%	17%	67%	17%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S8**	Sales representatives should spend more time on increasing the range of products sold to a single customer (more cross selling)	0%	17%	13%	63%	8%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S9**	Sales representatives should spend more time on using the CRM system	8%	13%	38%	29%	13%	**IR**
Desired Tasks	**S10**	Sales representatives should spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management, etc.)	0%	13%	29%	42%	17%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S11**	Sales representatives should spend more time on developing and selling solution to their customers	0%	8%	13%	54%	25%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S12**	Sales representatives should spend more time on understanding the psychological aspects of sales	0%	13%	33%	38%	17%	**A**
Desired Tasks	**S13**	Sales representatives should spend more time on using social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) as a support tool for sales	0%	25%	42%	29%	4%	**IR**
Future Tasks	**S14**	In future, sales representatives will not deal with simple products	4%	13%	33%	46%	4%	**A**
Future Tasks	**S15**	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating themselves (because products get more complex)	0%	8%	38%	42%	13%	**A**
Future Tasks	**S16**	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on educating their customers (because products get more complex)	0%	13%	25%	46%	17%	**A**
Future Tasks	**S17**	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on collaborating with other departments (marketing, product management etc.)	0%	4%	33%	50%	13%	**A**
Future Tasks	**S18**	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on approaching end customers	0%	8%	29%	46%	17%	**A**
Future Tasks	**S19**	In future, sales representatives will spend more time on using sales supporting software	0%	13%	42%	42%	4%	**IR**
RQ2: Challenges								
Challenges	**S20**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with qualifying customers	0%	4%	25%	54%	17%	**A**
Challenges	**S21**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with qualifying leads	0%	0%	21%	58%	21%	**A**
Challenges	**S22**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time qualifying decision makers at customers	0%	0%	21%	58%	21%	**A**
Challenges	**S23**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with educating themselves about the products they sell	0%	0%	38%	54%	8%	**A**
Challenges	**S24**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time with solving issues for customers (delivery times, service issues)	0%	25%	13%	25%	38%	**A**
Challenges	**S25**	Sales representatives spend a lot of time driving	0%	13%	21%	38%	29%	**A**
RQ3: Reuirements for Sales Supporting Software								
SW Requirements	**S26**	New tools must integrate into the existing software environment seamlessly	0%	0%	17%	67%	17%	**A**
SW Requirements	**S27**	New tools must provide information about the customer (prices, contacts, used solutions)	0%	4%	13%	71%	13%	**A**
SW Requirements	**S28**	New tools must be available on different platforms	0%	0%	17%	58%	25%	**A**
SW Requirements	**S29**	New tools must be in line with data protection agreements	0%	0%	13%	58%	29%	**A**
SW Requirements	**S30**	New tools must always produce reliable results	0%	0%	8%	54%	38%	**A**
SW Requirements	**S31**	New tools must be self-explanatory	0%	4%	38%	38%	21%	**A**
RQ4: Challenges with Sales Supporting Software								
SW Chall.	**S32**	Sales representatives will value new tools as a help for their work	0%	8%	17%	67%	8%	**A**
SW Chall.	**S33**	New tools will replace the personal relationship between sales representatives and customers	25%	29%	8%	29%	8%	**R**
SW Chall.	**S34**	Sales representatives must be critical towards the results produced by new tools	0%	21%	21%	38%	21%	**A**