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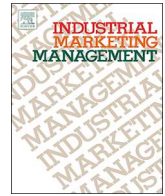
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Increasing resilience by creating an adaptive salesforce

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ABSTRACT

During disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the resilience of any commercial organization becomes a critical characteristic. This paper examines the flexibility of the sales process—that is, adaptive selling—as an analog to resiliency, and recommends that firms create an adaptive salesforce to increase resilience. By examining the extant research and conducting interviews with sales leaders, the findings of this paper suggest that an adaptive salesforce should focus on three areas of change within team structures. The first is an increase in flexibility and adaptiveness for the functions that the salesforce performs. The second area is an improvement of the adaptiveness of scale in which sales functions can be rapidly insourced or outsourced. The final area is technology adaptiveness, in which the salesforce adopts the use of technologies that are most relevant to customers. Implications for the firm, sales function, and individual salespeople are also derived.

The last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the global connectivity between people and markets. It has become commonplace for firms to cater to global markets, employ a global workforce, and rely upon a global supply chain (Sharma, 2016). Such connectivity has increased economic opportunity, but at the same time, it has also amplified local issues into global issues (Ney, 2012). In this context, the world has faced crises of finance, security, and health that pose unprecedented threats to this new globalized connectivity (Biggs, Biggs, Dakos, Scholes, & Schoon, 2011). The COVID-19 crisis is an exemplar of such crises, causing firms to shift to remote work, reduce the number of new endeavors, and change communication patterns.

Specifically, in a survey of Italian sales professionals conducted two days before the formal lockdown, Guenzi (2020) found that physical access to their buyers was difficult and that they would have to use digital communication channels that they were not accustomed to; furthermore, the survey also revealed that discretionary spending had decreased. According to a survey of business-to-business decision-makers post-COVID-19 (April 2020), digitally enabled sales interactions are now more than twice as important as traditional sales interactions, compared to pre-COVID-19 levels, which were roughly equivalent (Gregg, Kim, & Perrey, 2020). Gregg et al. (2020) also report that nearly four in five business-to-business sales teams have already shifted to using videoconferencing or phones, while Guda (2020) and Singh (2020) also suggest that, at least for the short-term, selling practices will need to change.

In an attempt to enhance our understanding of changes in sales management practices, we utilize a mixed-method process. We use theory to develop our framework and interview five academics who

were active in executive education, as well as seventeen sales executives and consultants to provide feedback on sales organizations' actual practices. Based on theory and interviews, we suggest that to adapt and thrive in this emerging arena of increased global crises, firms must be resilient, and in turn, the salesforce must also be resilient. Our research suggests that in practical terms, this entails the design of a resilient salesforce that we label as the “adaptive salesforce.” The adaptive salesforce must be functionally adaptive, scale-adaptive, and technologically adaptive.

This section introduces our research, and the following section contains a discussion on the theoretical background of our study. We then discuss elements of an adaptive salesforce and provide details of our data collection methods that confirm our findings from the literature. The fifth section discusses the design of a resilient salesforce, the sixth section discusses the managerial implications of an adaptive salesforce, and the final section concludes our research.

1. Theoretical background

The salesforce has transformed over the last four decades, as firms have increased their efforts to improve salesforce effectiveness and efficiency, as the cost-per-call and the number of calls needed to close a sale have also risen (Sharma, 2002). There is no research that comprehensively examines salesforce transformation, but three literature streams inform us of changes in the salesforce. The first literature stream derives from changes in functions that salesforce perform (e.g., Marshall, Moncrief, & Lask, 1999; Moncrief, 1986). The second stream of literature derives from the insourcing and outsourcing of selling

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functions and the ability of sales organizations to scale (e.g., Sharma, Iyer, & Raajpoot, 2009; Thaichon, Surachartkumtonkun, Quach, Weaven, & Palmatier, 2018). The final stream of literature derives from the adoption of technology by salesforce (e.g., Kumar, Sharma, Vatavwala, & Kumar, 2020; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012). Each area is discussed below.

1.1. Changes in the functions performed by salespeople

The roles of salespeople have continued to change over the last four decades. Nearly forty years ago, Dubinsky (1981) identified the seven steps of selling that apply to most sales situations: prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close, and follow-up. Salespeople traditionally performed all of these functions, but in the interest of efficiency and effectiveness, salespeople were asked to reduce some of the steps that they performed (Sharma, 2007). The first of these steps to be excised was follow-up, and firms created a new function to address the responsibilities that once came with it: customer service (Sharma et al., 2009). Currently, customer service is also increasingly involved in selling to existing customers (Rapp et al., 2017), which is yet another a traditional salesforce function.

The next stage of evolution was the creation of a new functional group to address prospecting, pre-approach, and approach. Thaichon et al. (2018), suggest that some of the initial stages of the sales process can be conducted over the Internet or by an inside salesforce. They provide an example of customers ordering over the Internet, contacting inside channel for service, and contacting outside sales for solutions and feedback. In this example, the proficiency of outside salespeople is reduced to proposing solutions, specialization in presentation, overcoming objections, and close, leaving little expertise in other areas. The classic examples of this focus are so-called “hunters,” who are tasked only with bringing new customers to the firm (contrast these with farmers, who maintain the relationship, c.f., DeCarlo & Lam, 2016). One of the few areas where all steps are still followed by a single salesperson is in major or key account management, where salespeople act as general managers, and all customer communications are routed through teams (Sheth & Sharma, 2007).

1.2. Outsourcing of salesforce functions

Iyer, Sharma, and Evanschitzky (2006), suggest that direct sales are only required in a limited domain of high-profitability and low sales frequency contexts. They suggest that for all other customer groups, personal selling can be outsourced to other functional areas or external firms. Therefore, due to scale and efficiency considerations, sales processes are being outsourced (Anderson, 1996; Sharma et al., 2009). The first sales process to be outsourced was the follow-up, which was outsourced to call centers, both domestically and internationally (Anderson, 1996). At the same time, the outsourced call centers also assumed the functions of reselling to existing customers (Jasmand, Blazevic, & De Ruyter, 2012). Second, the processes of prospecting, pre-approach, and approach are being outsourced. Finally, other functions such as presentation—and sometimes the entire selling process—are outsourced, as for some FMCG firms (Bokkerink, Charlin, Sajdeh, & Wald, 2017).

Two primary reasons for the outsourcing of sales functions are cost reduction and the ability of salesforce to scale. As an example, using external organization, firms can easily, quickly, and with lower costs, upscale or downscale prospecting efforts. However, firms have sacrificed the experience/intellectual property associated with specific sales steps, and typically, the firm's salesforce retains no expertise in outsourced functions. This is the reason that several studies (Good & Calontone, 2019; Moncrief, 2017; Rapp, 2009; Thaichon et al., 2018) all recommend a closer examination of consequences before outsourcing sales functions.

1.3. Technology adoption by the salesforce

Firms have introduced technology such as CRM software and sales enhancement tools (Kumar et al., 2020), but both research and anecdotal data suggest that the salespeople themselves tend to resist new technologies and prefer traditional interactions (e.g., Ahearne, Hughes, & Schillewaert, 2007; Sharma & Sheth, 2010; Spreer & Rauschnabel, 2016). Research has suggested that technology adoption increases salesperson performance, and the result may be driven by higher-performing salespeople adopting technology faster than lower-performing salespeople (Hunter & Perreault Jr., 2006; Johnson & Bharadwaj, 2005; Mathieu, Ahearne, & Taylor, 2007; Sharma & Sheth, 2010). The situation is particularly acute because there is a gap between customers' preference for technology and salespeople's ability to use the technology (e.g., Sharma & Sheth, 2010; Tanner Jr & Shipp, 2005; Wittman, 2019). As an example, Rocco and Bush (2016) find that salespeople underestimate the importance of their customers' technology expectations. However, LinkedIn (2016) reports that salespeople's performance is highly correlated with technology use, and that top salespeople are more likely to use a customer relationship management system, productivity apps, social selling tools, and sales intelligence tools. Due to their resistance to technology, salespeople are unable to connect with customers in the customers' preferred technology mode, which is a problem that becomes especially acute in times of crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) when the in-person presence is reduced or eliminated. As an example, one in five business-to-business sales teams have not shifted to videoconference or phone as the method of contact, despite the imposition of social distancing measures that make traditional in-person contact impracticable (Gregg et al., 2020).

2. Increasing resilience: the adaptive salesforce

During disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience becomes a critical characteristic of an organization. Haimés (2009) defines *resilience* as “the ability of the system to withstand a major disruption within acceptable degradation parameters and to recover within an acceptable time and composite costs and risks.” In the business context, resilience describes the inherent characteristics of those organizations that are able to respond more quickly, recover faster, or develop more unconventional ways of doing business under stress than others (Linnenluecke, 2017).

The critical organizational traits of a resilient organization are adaptability and flexibility in the context of organizational strategy (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016), supply chain (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, Busby, & Zorzini, 2015), or disasters (Manyena, 2006). We suggest that the key aspect of a resilient salesforce is flexibility, such that the salesforce can shift efforts and resources where they are needed. There has been research on the optimization of salesforce (e.g., Madhani, 2018; Misra, Pinker, & Shumsky, 2004) in areas other than marketing. The three salesforce shifts (function, outsourcing/scale, and technology adoption) discussed in the previous section have reduced the flexibility of the salesforce. When salespeople specialize in specific steps of the selling process, they cannot pivot to other steps of the selling process when demand shifts. Similarly, when selling steps are outsourced, it is not easy to insource those steps, because the relevant expertise or intellectual property no longer exists within the organization. Finally, when salespeople do not adopt technology, they restrict the range of modes within which they can conduct the selling process. Our model is presented in Fig. 1.

We examine the resilience of a salesforce by examining the analog of the flexibility of a sales process, i.e., adaptive selling. Adaptive selling, a construct at the salesperson level, suggests that salespeople need to adapt to the customer's needs and wants. In adaptive selling, salespeople develop and implement sales communication that is focused on each customer and can make rapid adjustments in response to their customers' feedback (Weitz, 1978). We suggest that to increase

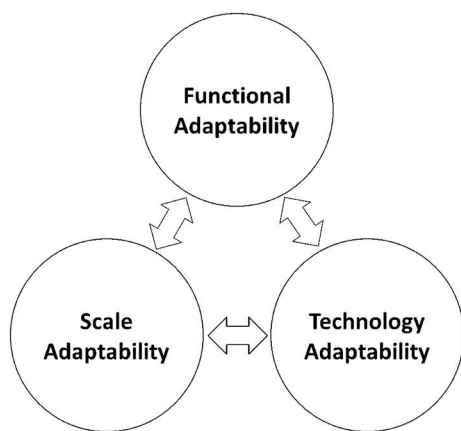


Fig. 1. Adaptive salesforce.

resilience, a salesforce must be more adaptive in their interactions with customers, even when there are relatively few shifting customer conditions. Our attempt is not the first to broaden adaptive selling—Kwak, Anderson, Leigh, and Bonifield (2019) examined macro-adaptive strategy at the salesperson level. We focus on the salesforce level and suggest three areas of salesforce changes. The first area of change is in increasing the flexibility and adaptiveness in the functions that the salesforce performs. The second area is the adaptiveness of scale in which sales functions can be rapidly insourced or outsourced. The final area is technology adaptiveness, in which the salesforce uses technologies that are most relevant to customers. Each is discussed below.

2.1. Functional adaptiveness

The role of salespeople has continued to change over the last four decades (Oh, 2017; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007). Moncrief (1986) developed a comprehensive inventory of selling activities in 51 industrial selling organizations and identified one hundred and twenty-one sales activities. In a follow-up study, Marshall et al. (1999) identified an additional forty-nine activities for salespeople. However, today, outside salespeople are specialized and mostly focused on presentation, overcoming objections, and closing sales (Castro-González & Bande, 2019; Fatemi, 2019; Marcos-Cuevas & Ryals, 2015). Also, as an example of specialization, Hochstein, Rangarajan, Mehta, and Kochar (2020) suggest that there is a new type of salesperson, identified as a customer success manager, whose role is to focus on relationships.

However, in order to increase their functional adaptiveness, the salesforce must expand their functional expertise and perform all steps of selling. Researchers have suggested that firms and employees must become multidextrous in their functioning (Ritter & Geersbro, 2018).

The need for functional adaptiveness is more critical in times of disruption, as new sales opportunities may become scarcer, but there are also opportunities to build existing relationships and to prospect for new customers; in recent years, these important skills have been deemphasized for the existing salesforce. In order to become more adaptive and effective, salespeople should be retrained in these neglected steps of selling, in which they are likely to have little or no expertise. Salespeople must be involved in all sales activities so that they can pivot their focus in times of shifting demands. This way, salespeople can be involved in all sales functions—not only in the sort of face-to-face interactions that are becoming less important, especially in the face of disruptive circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Scale adaptiveness

In order to increase adaptiveness, firms must make salesforce size more adaptive and must reduce the boundary between insourced and outsourced talent. To match emerging customer needs, Marshall et al.

(1999) suggest that firms need to develop a “selling mix” that includes traditional field forces, inside-selling, key account management, independent salespeople, Internet, and part-time sales forces. Similarly, Thaichon et al. (2018) suggest that sales organizations consist of an Internet presence, inside sales and outside sales, which allows firms to change their strategy, and the focus of communication channels based on customer needs. As suggested earlier, firms can become scale adaptable by outsourcing the salesforce (Good & Calontone, 2019; Rapp, 2009), but retaining knowledge.

Based on research on outsourcing, the best outcomes emerge when the firm and outsourcers work as a team (Sutherland, Viktorov, Blount, & Puntikov, 2007). This suggests that salespeople must be deeply involved in outsourced activities—that is, they must be “part of the team.” Reducing that boundary allows firms to scale up or scale down the sales function in response to demand. Firms must retain intellectual property and, at the same time, push their salespeople to excel in multiple functions so that effort can be shifted to match demand.

2.3. Technology adaptiveness

The final area of adaptiveness is technology. Salespeople must be able to use multiple technologies and be adaptive to the needs of the customer. As stated earlier, salespeople that use technology perform better than salespeople who do not (Hunter & Perreault Jr., 2006; Johnson & Bharadwaj, 2005; Mathieu et al., 2007; Sharma & Sheth, 2010). The use of technology may be more critical in times of global crisis, when in-person meetings and travel may not be possible, salespeople can continue to interact with customers using technology such as videoconferencing. Training in such technology, of course, is critical, and firms need to ensure that all their salespeople are technology-adaptive. As stated earlier, nearly 20% of business-to-business sales teams have not shifted to videoconference or phone post-COVID-19, even though buyers prefer digitally enabled sales interactions (Gregg et al., 2020).

3. Data collection from practice

Our goal in collecting data from practice was to research the alignment between theory and practice. We had examined literature and created frameworks around the shift in the salesforce as well as the design of a resilient salesforce. In our interviews, we collected data on practice from two groups: 1) academics who were active in sales executive education, and 2) sales executives and consultants. Our interviews with the academics were usually one hour long and were conducted through video conferencing. We used the literature and feedback from the academics to form the topic guide that is available in Table 1. Finally, in order to ensure that the findings from our literature reflected practices, and to increase the generalizability of our recommendations, we interviewed seventeen sales executives and consultants between April 1 to April 13, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic (titles and industries are provided in Table 2). The interviews with executives and consultants were conducted via video conferencing and lasted between 30 and 45 min. The interviews confirmed both extant literature and our conceptualization of an adaptive salesforce. The results (quotes) on changes in the salesforce across function and outsourcing are provided in Table 3 (we did not interview respondents on technology adoption, as the data is overwhelmingly positive). The results (quotes) on the adaptive salesforce are provided in Table 4.

4. The strategy of building an adaptive salesforce

The previous sections discussed the need for an adaptive salesforce. This section concentrates on the practical process of making a salesforce more adaptive. This section is divided into three steps: strategy, structure, and implementation.

Table 1
Topic guide.

1	How has the sales function evolved in your organization in recent years? Which of these sales steps is your salesforce not performing—prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close, and follow-up? What changes have you observed in the business environment that have necessitated this evolution of the sales function?
2	As the sales function has evolved in your industry, is there a move towards outsourcing some selling steps (e.g., prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close, and follow-up)? If so, what are the specific functions that have been outsourced? If not, why did your firm not outsource sales function?
3	Does your sales organization have the flexibility to changes directions? Specifically, can the salesforce change the functions it performs (prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close, and follow-up)? What would you do to increase your salesforce's functional flexibility? What will be the positives and negatives from such a move?
4	Is your sales organization sufficiently flexible to insource or outsource sales functions rapidly? What would you do to increase your salesforce's sourcing flexibility? What will be the positives and negatives from such a move?
5	Does your sales organization have the flexibility to use emerging technology rapidly? What would you do to increase your salesforce's technology flexibility? What will be the positives and negatives from such a move?
6	If your sales organization increases its functional, sourcing, and technology flexibility, what will be the positive and negative impacts on the firm, the sales function, and the salespeople?
7	When you think about the sales force adapting to the various changes, how do you ensure the tradeoff between effectiveness (top-line growth) versus efficiency (cost control)? What does this mean for the sales manager? What does this mean to the sales organization?
8	When you think about all the technological advances that salespeople have today, how should the various levels—salespeople, sales management, and the sales organization as a whole—deal with these rapid changes.

All the above questions also have a component on what happens post-COVID-19.

4.1. Strategy

The sales strategy of a firm drives the structure of the sales organization (Zoltners, Sinha, & Lorimer, 2009). An element of strategy is “one-team,” where all members of the team work with each other to achieve organizational goals. Research has suggested that “one-team” is a successful strategy in customer service (Sharma, 2020), software development (Dorairaj, Noble, & Malik, 2012), real estate (Barclay, 2018), and medicine (Goldhar, Daub, & Sridharan, 2016; Winkelbauer, Stull, & Yager, 2016). The superior performance of the “one-team” approach has also been researched in personal selling and sales management (Barrett, 1986; Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005). Based on the success of sales teams or selling centers (Moon & Armstrong, 1994), the strategy for an adaptive salesforce is oriented around the concept of “one-team” or “one salesforce” that is flexible and adaptable. The “one salesforce” concept dictates that every member of the sales organization must be involved in sales activities, and capable of performing any sales step (Sheth & Sharma, 2008). We suggest that some members of the organization may possess particular expertise in a given step, but all members of the organization should be capable of performing all selling tasks to a certain degree. As is seen in manufacturing (Nemetz & Fry, 1988), when everyone can perform every function of a team, resources can be diverted as needed from areas of low demand to areas of high demand.

4.2. Structure

The structure or organization of a resilient salesforce lies in the building of sales teams. Teams are regarded as knowledge-integrating enablers, and teamwork enables shared and mobilized knowledge in the team (Grant, 1996; Leybourne & Sadler-Smith, 2006; Sharma, 2020). Sales teams have been the subject of considerable research, and studies such as that of Eby, Adams, Russell, and Gaby (2000) have identified personal qualities and situational conditions that help create effective sales teams from individual salespeople, such as preference for working in teams, perceived participation, trust in peers, and flexible policies. Lambe, Jay, Webb, and Ishida (2009) highlighted the importance of self-managed sales teams, finding that self-management was strongly linked to improved sales team performance. Finally, Rapp, Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp (2010) examined the performance of virtual sales teams. Overall, the central conclusion of the research is that sales teams enhance performance.

4.3. Implementation

Implementation aspects are integral to an adaptive salesforce. Anthony (2008) suggests six factors: 1) the need for a crisis or some kind of “burning platform” to motivate transformational change; 2) a clear vision and strategy that allows room for iteration; 3) a recognition

Table 2
Respondent profile.

Title	Experience (in years)	Industry	Company turnover
Sales Director- UK/Ireland	15	Medical Devices	1.4 Billion USD
CEO	35	Consulting	Unavailable
Global KAM	20	Chemicals	10 Billion USD
Partner	35	Consulting	Unavailable
Global VP of Services	30	Maritime	4 Billion USD
Global Key Account Manager	16	Food Ingredients	Unavailable (Family company)
Global Business Unit Director	18	Special Chemicals	Unavailable (Family company)
Global Sales Manager	14	Financial Services	12 Billion USD
Global Sales Director	12	Engineering/Logistics	Unavailable (Family company)
Global Sales Manager	25	Fashion Goods	Unavailable (Family company)
Country Sales Director	18	Pharma	2.5 Billion USD
Project Director	25	Hardware/Software	300 Million USD
VP Global Marketing Communications and Talent	28	Industrial Manufacturer	5 Billion USD
VP Digital Transformation	23	Industrial Manufacturer	3.5 Billion USD
Director	35	Consulting	Unavailable
Global VP Therapeutics Systems	27	Medical Devices	4.2 Billion USD
Global Marketing Manager	33	Steel Manufacturing	76 Billion USD

Table 3
Changes in salesforce—supporting quotes.

Source	Quote
Changes in the functions performed by salespeople	
Global Business Unit Director, Specialty Chemicals	“Our field salespeople are people with a lot of experience and so [it has] become too expensive and specialized for them to be looking at prospecting and pre-approach. So, we have moved to have an inside sales force who are tasked with following up on leads from our marketing initiatives as well as do cold calling to get and prospect leads. In some instances, our inside sales reps are also responsible for doing product presentations and maybe even close deals—especially for smaller orders.”
Former Country Head and C-suite executive of three multinational OEMs	“I think that the individual responsible for prospecting should be focused on working with the customer to co-create novel ideas that will help the customers and should not even be burdened with revenue targets. Once they work on these novel ideas, they can then pass it on to a hunting team—or if it is an existing customer, a farming team.”
Global Key Account Manager, Specialty Chemicals	“In our organization, we are increasingly moving towards our marketing organization becoming more involved in demand generation and even initial qualification of the needs.”
Global Sales Manager, Financial Services	“We are increasingly using our marketing team to help us come up with targeted campaigns towards specific segments, screen these leads, and then pass it on to our salespeople.”
Outsourcing of salesforce functions	
Global Sales Director, Engineering and Logistics Service	“We are increasingly working with freelancing, industry-specific consultants who we use to help either get us information about upcoming projects and then use them to get either an inside track into the prospect/customer or even get us a preliminary meeting.”
Global Sales Manager, Fashion Goods	“As we grew in our outreach, we decided to outsource all of our sales activities to keep our overheads under control and only offer commissions to external agents. This has served us well—to get a broader reach while keeping sales costs under control.”
Sales Academic, Europe	“As part of our research, we were looking at how traditional business-to-business manufacturing companies were dealing with salesforce issues as it pertained to newer product offerings—especially those with more subscription services-based model...This organization decided to spin off as a separate business unit with its own sales process, and consequently, its own salesforce.”
Country Sales Director, European Generics Manufacturer	“...[O]ur customers who complain about our competitors who have outsourced the sales force, while they value the same caring approach from our company, even though they are visited less and by newer salespeople.”

that transformation is a multi-year journey; 4) a need to put the customer or consumer in the center of the transformation equation; 5) the critical importance of demonstrating to skeptics that different actions can lead to different results; and 6) the need to over-communicate to employees, customers, stakeholders, and shareholders. [Basford and Schaninger \(2016\)](#) suggest four steps for changing mindsets and behavior: 1) fostering understanding and conviction, 2) reinforcing changes through formal mechanisms, 3) developing talent and skills, and 4) role-modeling.

Simplifying and applying these tenets in accordance with the context of an adaptive salesforce, we recommend creating an imperative for change, designing a team-based sales organization, and training at the individual level. We base these recommendations on our research, which suggests that a successful transition to sales teams requires positive attitudes towards working in groups and towards the job itself, as well as policies at the organizational level. Regarding the first and most important of these policies, senior executives should create a strategy document to direct the shift to team-selling and effectively communicate the imperative for change. Second, the firm should create policies for team-selling that include design, management, and evaluation. Finally, sales team members should receive additional training in areas where their knowledge is most limited.

5. Managerial implications of the shift towards an adaptive salesforce

The discussion in the previous pages highlights the need for an adaptive, resilient salesforce that is capable of responding to disruptions. This section discusses the managerial implications of building an adaptive salesforce for the firm, the sales organization, and the individual. In each case, we discuss the organization of teams, implementation (team structures and technology), evaluation systems, recruitment, and managerial processes. Our findings are summarized in [Table 5](#).

5.1. Firm-level impact

In creating an adaptive salesforce, firms must make changes to their

people policies, and at a broader level, firms need to develop policies for teams. In turbulent environments, firms need to move away from processes to more dynamic capabilities ([Benner & Tushman, 2003](#)). This suggests that even with team structures, firms need to move away from process-oriented management of teams where managers decide on the structure and function of teams. Research has suggested the creation of autonomous and self-governing teams, where team members decide on group strategy and members ([Sharma, 2020](#)). [Bernstein, Bunch, Canner, and Lee \(2016\)](#) found that the shift from managed to autonomous teams generated dramatic results at Volvo (defects reduced by 90%); FedEx (service errors reduced by 13%); C&S Wholesale Grocers (created 60% cost advantage over competitors), and General Mills (increased productivity by up to 40%).

Firms will need to implement team structure within traditional matrix organizations. [Ratanjee and Dvorak \(2018\)](#), highlight three critical elements of successful implementation—clarity on expectation, connection to purpose, and cutting red tape. Firms need to have clarity of expectations that focuses on consistent communications and frequent evaluation of teams. Firms need to provide a connection to purpose, which focuses on communicating how the structure and goals fulfill the purpose of the firms. Finally, firms need to cut red tape, which suggests that teams focus on outcomes rather than satisficing. In addition, firms need to pursue digitization to make interactions within and outside organizations easier, and capture critical market and customer information.

Another critical element of firm-level strategy is performance evaluation and reward systems. Team-based evaluation and reward systems are critical for self-managed teams ([Magpili & Pazos, 2018](#)). [Sharma \(2020\)](#) suggests that team evaluations focus on the quality of outcome/delivery, innovativeness of delivery, learnings of the team, and individuals' contribution to the team. Firms initially focus on the quality of outcomes and delivery, and with maturity, gravitate towards learning and innovation.

Because of the focus on teamwork with associated with dynamic learning capabilities, recruitment, and evaluation of people needs to evolve. [Sharma \(2020\)](#) suggests that traditionally, firms focused on in-depth skills and ignored the width of knowledge. In the emerging structures, firms will recruit and promote people that have skill

Table 4
Adaptive salesforce-supporting quotes.

Source	Quote
Functional adaptiveness	
Country Sales Director, European Generics Manufacturer	Customer changes “ha[ve] necessitated us to rethink our sales strategy and sales roles. We never had key account managers before, but we are now looking into having specific key account managers that are promoted from within the sales organization.”
Sales academic, North America	“Pharma companies now transition some of their general sales reps into medical science liaisons who have better access to the doctors and can play an influential role in getting pharma products prescribed.”
Global Business Unit Director, Specialty Chemicals	“All new recruits, especially those with limited experience, are first in inside sales and are then groomed towards more outside selling roles, and they can finally move on to key account manager roles...This is helping us out now, especially given the current COVID situation, where our inside salespeople are becoming more relevant and, in some cases, help out our field sales with understanding how to close deals over new technologies.”
Project Manager Director, Global Hardware and Software firm	“Some of our inside sales specialists are also trained on the more innovative marketing automation tools to help them get a better reach to prospects as well as work on person-driven marketing collateral. This helps them when we transition them into more customer-facing sales roles.”
Scale adaptiveness	
Global Key Account Manager, Specialty Chemicals	“While there is a realization that outsourcing parts of the sales process or even the sales force might make business sense, there is still a hesitancy from top management about losing touch with the customer. So, we are beginning to see a lot more involvement of marketing in both the demand generation phase, but also when it comes to helping our key accounts provide cutting-edge, relevant information during the after-sales servicing the customer.”
VP of Global Marketing Communication and Talent, Industrial Manufacturing	“Due to competitive pressures and increasingly demanding customers, we are considering working with third-party distributors and dealers for our smaller customers with simpler demands.”
VP of Digital Transformation, Industrial Manufacturing	“We are looking into creating a new customer success department by copying from more the ‘born-in-the-cloud’ subscription-based service models. We had to convince our top management, but are starting a pilot project on customer success management.”
Technology adaptiveness	
Global Channel Development and Key Account Manager, Food Ingredients	“We do realize that these days with add-ons like LinkedIn Sales Navigator- our salespeople can do a more efficient targeting of prospects and reach out to these prospects. We are exploring using LinkedIn Sales Navigator with our sales force. Of course, our salespeople need to be trained on how to use this tool together with our traditional CRM system.”
Inside Sales Director- Employee Engagement Software	“Our sales reps are equipped with Zoom Info to look for more information about their contacts, which in turn integrates with our CRM system. In addition, our reps work with Chili Piper app for lead conversion and scheduling and finally work with SalesLoft – a sales engagement platform. We are seeing some amazing results from our investments, especially with our salespeople being more engaged, more contacts reached, and effective follow up with our prospects and converting them into demos.”
Global Marketing Director, Industrial Equipment	“To help our salespeople deal with complexity, we have invested in a new sales enablement platform-that will help our marketing team not only push content on our website, and social media cites, but also use the same content, but personalized per member of the customer's decision-making unit to help our salespeople customize their message per customer/per decision-making unit member...We are hoping to shorten the sales cycle times considerably while making our marketing expenditure more cost-efficient.”
Global Sales Enablement Director, Fintech	“We have a 30/60/90 day sales onboarding program for new recruits where we use our sales enablement platform to provide both digital training programs as well as use the same platform for our sales managers to coach the sales teams. We are seeing tremendous success with the same, with our salespeople becoming productive much sooner and with very low attrition rates.”
Country Head of Advisory Services, International Consulting Firm	“...most business-to-business companies above a certain size are increasingly looking into how to equip their sales teams with Social Selling Skills. This includes how to use LinkedIn Sales Navigator invariably. However, more cutting edge firms are beginning to realize the power of social media to help establish personal brands of salespeople, and so we see salespeople now being trained on how to use LinkedIn to not just prospect, but also to be seen as thought leaders in their domain-so that they are proactively sought after by their prospects.”

expertise, but can also be innovative and learn new areas, i.e., dynamic learning capabilities. In other words, recruiters need to focus on fluid intelligence in addition to crystallized intelligence. Diversity will also be valued as the participation of individuals with multiple skills, helps teams improve their flexibility and enhance the collaborative processes (Chan, Li, & Pierce, 2014; Magpili & Pazos, 2018).

Finally, managers also need to evolve. There is research agreement that excessive intervention from managers has adverse consequences for teams' processes (Magpili & Pazos, 2018). Thus, managers must be supportive in terms of resources and coordination while avoiding day-to-day micromanagement.

5.2. Sales organization-level impact

The sales organization will change as well, as salespeople need to work in teams, and teams will be in charge of all customer-facing activities. A sales team would include members from sales, marketing, customer service, accounting, and supply chain. Research has suggested that team members should learn all functions performed by a team (Sharma, 2020), and salespeople will need to perform all sales functions

and even other functions (e.g., supply chain) as a part of a sales team. The analog is key account teams where all members are customer experts (Sheth & Sharma, 2008). Second, in sales organizations, the boundary between outsourced sales activities, inside sales activities, and outside sales activities need to be reduced (Thaichon et al., 2018). This would involve salespeople from different organizations and different functional areas working as a team to satisfy the needs of customers.

In implementing team structures, members need to function well and reduce conflict, and team members need to be trained to function well in teams. A significant issue of team selling is social loafing in which team members expect to receive the rewards accruing to the team irrespective of their own individual effort (Weitz & Bradford, 2019). To reduce social loafing, each team member can be assigned a specific and assessable task; provide all-or-nothing incentive, which is a bonus awarded to the team if the goal is achieved; and build team cohesiveness to motivate participation (Weitz & Bradford, 2019). We would suggest that sales organizations monitor team conflict and social loafing. In moving to teams, some data from change management may be useful—Miller and Proctor (2016) suggest that 14% of people will

Table 5
Managerial implications of the adaptive salesforce.

Elements	Adaptive salesforce	
	Traditional	Firm level implications
Organization (team based) Implementation of team based structure	Hierarchical organization	Creating autonomous and self-governing teams Clarity on expectation, connection to purpose, and cutting red tape
Evaluation systems	Sales and other financial measures	Digitization Quality of outcome/delivery, innovativeness of delivery, learnings of the team, and individuals' contribution to the team
Recruitment	Focus on expertise/persuasion	Skills/Expertise and dynamic learning capabilities
Managerial process	Management of processes and outcomes	Resources support and coordination while avoiding day-to-day micromanagement
		Sales organization level implications
		Creation of multi-functional sales teams Autonomous and self-managed teams, trained to reduce conflict and social loafing Deployment of technology Goal achievement, customer feedback, timeliness, quality of deliverables, productivity, and team evaluation Creative problem-solving, innovativeness, conflict management, and building trust Empowering leadership
		Individual salesperson level implications
		Change from individual focus to team focus Share information and customers with team Adopt emerging technologies Change focus from individual and financial outcomes to team-based 360-degree outcomes Focus on dynamic learning Develop sales and other functional skills Change focus from sales manager to team

lead change, 65% will use/accept change, and 21% will resist change. We expect a similar percentage for salespeople, some of whom will be unable to work in teams and will leave the organization. Finally, sales managers need to deploy technology that enhances the interaction between the firm and its customers. Customers have specific technology requests, and sales organizations need to cater to those needs.

In developing evaluation systems, Gibson, Zellmer-Bruhn, and Schwab (2003) suggest that the evaluation of teams should be based on goal achievement, customer feedback (e.g., satisfaction), timeliness, quality of deliverables, and productivity. There is also a consensus that sales team members should evaluate the contributions of other salespeople in their teams.

In recruitment, Weitz and Bradford (2019), find that effective sales team associates must possess skills such as creative problem-solving, innovativeness, conflict management, and trust-building. They further suggest that these skills and abilities differ from those needed by traditional salespeople, who have historically focused on persuasion to the exclusion of other skill sets. Sales organizations will also need to develop learning (and training) orientation, wherein salespeople understand other sales tasks and other functions, rather than concentrating all of their proficiency in one functional area. Cross-training, job rotation, and dynamic learning should be a part of the team culture.

Finally, regarding sales manager processes, Menguc, Auh, and Uslu (2013) find that a sales manager's empowering leadership has a positive effect on a sales team's customer knowledge creation capability. They also find that a sales team's customer knowledge creation capability positively affects customer relationship performance and financial performance. Rapp et al. (2010) find that empowering leadership improves the team-planning processes. However, they also find that as sales teams gain more experience, they are less likely to engage in effective planning. Therefore, sales managers should practice empowering leadership, focus on promoting sales teams' customer knowledge creation capabilities, and ensure that effective planning does not fall by the wayside as experience increases.

5.3. Individual (salesperson)-level impact

An adaptive salesforce has significant impacts on individual salespeople. Salespeople are traditionally seen as solitary and focused on personal achievement (Weitz & Bradford, 2019). In an adaptive salesforce, salespeople will need to work collaboratively, focusing on team and organizational outcomes. This will be a change in mindset and functioning, and some salespeople may have a difficult time adjusting to the changes. There is a need for re-orientation of salespeople and the realization that traditional sales with individual customers/territories will no longer be possible. Managerial support should be provided, but a change in salespeople's orientation will be needed for success. Unfortunately, salespeople who prefer to continue working individually may have to leave the organization. We have seen a similar shift in salesforce with a decline of "hunters."

Regarding the implementation of sales structures, salespeople will need to give up control of information and customers, as teams and not individuals will own both. This will be a tough transition for most salespeople. In addition, salespeople will have to acquire additional skills so that teams can have both speed and flexibility. Salespeople also need to adopt technology as customers shift from face-to-face interactions. Resistance to technology adoption will not be successful in an adaptive salesforce.

In enhancing performance, salespeople will need to move beyond a focus on financial measures of sales to a focus on comprehensive measurement systems that include a 360-degree evaluation of goal achievement, customer feedback, teamwork, and learning orientation. Therefore, salespeople will need to adapt to dramatically changing evaluation systems.

In personal development, salespeople will need to focus on dynamic learning (Rangarajan, Dugan, Rouziou, & Kunkle, 2020). Traditionally,

salespeople have worked on acquiring customer knowledge. Adaptive salespeople will need to be experts in all sales functions, must constantly acquire customer knowledge, and should continue to develop expertise in other functional areas in order to maximize their performance as members of an adaptive salesforce.

Finally, regarding sales management processes, salespeople will need to move away from being managed by a single person, to being managed by teams. Salespeople should be able to adapt as they are used to be evaluated by multiple constituencies (sales managers, product managers, customers).

6. Conclusion

During disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the resilience of any commercial organization becomes a critical characteristic. Using the flexibility of adaptive selling as an analog for resilience, we recommend that firms design adaptive salesforces in order to better meet the demands of a volatile global sales environment. We used extant research and interviews with sales leaders to suggest that an adaptive salesforce should focus on improvements in three areas: flexibility and adaptiveness in the salesperson functions, adaptiveness of scale, and technology adaptiveness. The strategy, structure, and implementation of an adaptive salesforce were then derived. Finally, managerial implications for the firm, sales function, and individual salespeople were explained. We hope that this paper will serve as an impetus for further research in the area.

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