



Intellectual Output 2

White Paper

Present & Future B2B Customer Management Skills

Erasmus+ Project - CustMaS

Customer Management Skills in Digitalizing B2B Markets

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1 Introduction of CustMaS Project

Technology development is increasingly influencing Business-to-Business (B2B) markets. The shift towards digital self-service or remote over traditional interactions, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has compelled sales organizations to adopt modern digital tools to communicate with customers (Leszkiewicz et al. 2021; Cruz et al. 2022). In addition, tools powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT, are expected to create powerful support for marketing and sales, significantly affecting sales activities (Chui et al. 2022). AI technology could become either a robust supporter to salespeople who adapt or a challenge to people who refuse to change (Ahearne et al. 2005; Blount 2020). Consequently, reskilling, especially in digital skills, has become a priority for B2B sales organizations, with many sales leaders recognizing a skills gap among their sales representatives (Cruz et al. 2022). This gap highlights the demand for new sales skills, including digital, analytical, and quantitative skills (Cruz et al. 2022; Peesker et al. 2022).

In addition, the selling process has also become more customer-centric (Ahearne et al. 2022; Cruz et al. 2022). Technological advancements have enabled customers to access more information about product knowledge, diminishing the traditional informational role of salespeople. Consequently, B2B salespeople now face a more complex role, needing to engage with more educated customers and manage more information than before (Moncrief et al. 2006; Verbeke et al. 2011; Hochstein et al. 2019; Hochstein et al. 2021). In addition, customers are also placing more emphasis on a firm's relational processes than on the product's suitability (Mantrala and Albers 2013; Pulles et al. 2016; Kwiatek et al. 2020). Consequently, the role of salespeople has evolved towards managing customer relationships amidst digital transformation (CustMaS Consortium 2023).

Furthermore, in the context of the network economy, the European industry faces a set of complex challenges: intensified global geopolitical competition, the vulnerability of global supply networks to crises, increased sustainability demands, and ongoing demographic shifts (Leyen 2019). These factors lead to fundamental changes in customer behavior. Fortunately, new digital technologies offer opportunities to cope with these challenges. Yet, digitalization disrupts the traditional buyer-seller interaction (Krafft et al. 2020). In response, the Project "Customer Management Skills in digitalizing B2B Markets" (CustMaS) aims to identify both the current success skills in customer management and the digital success skills (CustMaS Consortium 2023).

However, current curricula at Higher Education Institutions and corporate skills development programs of vocational education providers do not address these challenges (Omazic and Zunk 2021). There is a lack of a scientifically grounded program for customer management skills development, particularly one that incorporates the growing demands of digitalization. This project aims to bridge this educational gap, enhancing the competitiveness of the European economy by offering training for professional B2B sales personnel. This training will reduce inefficiencies and friction in the increasingly digitalising demand and supply networks (CustMaS Consortium 2023).

According to the CustMaS project proposal, the objective of the project is to design an empirically validated skills model for B2B customer management skills, a (post-graduate level) curriculum, and a program guide for developing these skills. The curriculum will be offered as a Master's program. It will foster cooperation between the participating universities concerning sales professionals' customer management skills in the context of increasingly digitalized B2B markets (e.g. setting up and selling in virtual showrooms, diagnosing customer needs online, text analytics useful in modeling the topics that B2B buyers prioritize on their web site, in e-mails, Twitter posts, etc). In particular, the project has the following objectives:

1. Develop an up-to-date, comprehensive, and empirically validated model of skills in B2B customer management in a digitalizing world.
2. Develop a post-graduate course curriculum and program guide, including program-intended learning outcomes, appropriate pedagogy, and evaluation strategies.
3. Disseminate the results of the project for a broader community. The project will develop a self-assessment tool for customer management skill evaluation and prepare an introductory Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on upskilling and reskilling. The course can be used by students in electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, logistics, industrial engineering, life sciences (e.g., biology, biotechnology, pharmacology, zoology), and business administration, as well as by other learners. It will also help promote awareness and interest in professional sales and selling career paths that appear to offer a bright outlook in the future job market.

The CustMaS project comprises five research phases, corresponding to five intellectual outputs (IOs). The first phase contains a literature review on B2B sales, alongside an analysis of sales job advertisements and marketing education (IO1). The next phases of this project will deliver a validated list of skills (IO2 and IO3), a tested and refined designed curriculum for

higher education (IO4), and a Massive Open Online Course on digital customer management skills within the B2B sector (IO5). After finishing a project phase, the obtained results will be documented in a white paper.

This white paper represents the intellectual output from the second project phase called “Benchmarking Cases” (IO 2), which was led by the team at Graz University of Technology. The paper is structured as follows: Chapter 2 recaps the research strategy and findings of the project's first phase (IO 1). Chapter 3 details the objectives, tasks, and research questions of the second project phase. Chapter 4 explores the theoretical framework underpinning this white paper. Chapter 5 describes the applied methodology for the benchmark. Chapter 6 presents the identified present and future skills as well as the state-of-the-art B2B customer management skill model. The final Chapter 7 summarises the findings and connects them to the forthcoming project phase.

2 Review of Project Phase 1

The first project phase aimed to develop a “B2B customer management Skills Model“. Initially, a literature review was conducted to gain an academic overview of customer management skills and digital selling technologies. This was followed by an analysis of B2B sales job advertisements. Subsequently, top-level educational programs in B2B marketing and sales were evaluated to identify skills currently taught at the Master’s level. Finally, gaps between the skills demanded in job advertisements and those imparted by educational institutions were investigated (CustMaS Consortium 2023). Figure 1 illustrates an overview of the research approach.

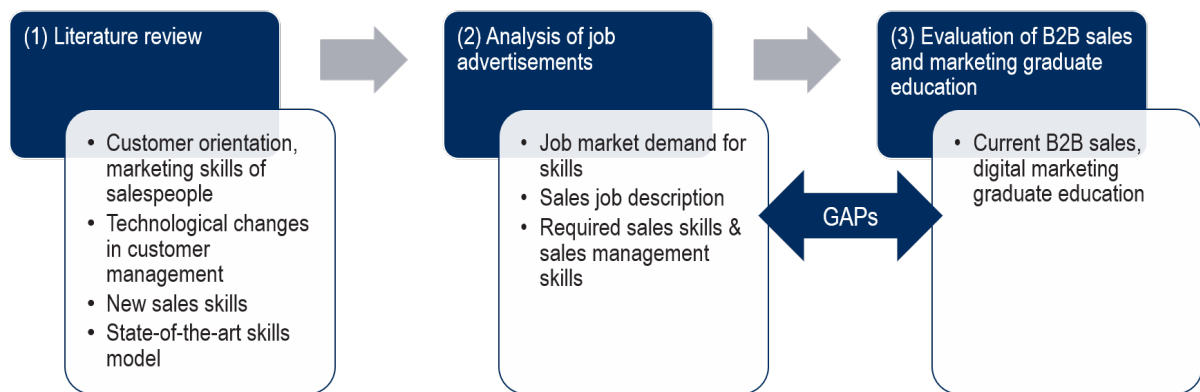


Figure 1: Research Strategy IO 1(CustMaS Consortium 2023)

Table 1 lists the skills identified in the first project phase, representing the literature-based B2B Customer Management Skills Model. This model served as the foundation for the second phase of the project.

Conceptual Skills	Human/Interpersonal Skills	Technical Skills
Account management/ strategic selling	Adaptiveness	Business case development
Business and financial acumen	Analytical skills	Closing
Business ethics	Collaboration	Follow-up
Challenging sales skills	Communication	Implementation planning/ project management
Consultative sales skills	Coping with stress	Internal system literacy
Customer engagement	Creativity	Negotiation
Customer success management	Emotional intelligence	Presentation
Entrepreneurial skills	First impression/initial impact	Prospecting
Funnel management	Interpersonal skills/ relationship management	Social Selling
Industry research and value development	Leadership (formal and informal)	Technology
Objection handling	Learning	Writing skills and reading literacy
Orchestration	Listening	
Product knowledge	Personal skills	
Solution selling	Personality identification and communication impact	
	Prioritization	
	Process improvement/ problem-solving	
	Questioning	

Table 1: IO 1 skills(CustMaS Consortium 2023)

3 Overview of Project Phase 2

The second phase “Benchmarking Cases” of the CustMaS project, as outlined in the project proposal, is driven by the need for triangulation. The aim of this phase is to extend the literature-based B2B Customer Management Skills Model from IO 1 with missing and future-relevant customer management skills. This must be achieved by conducting interviews with B2B salespeople from best-practice companies.

The main objective of the second phase is to provide a state-of-the-art skill model for B2B customer management. This objective is divided into 2 sub-objectives: the identification of (I) currently important skills not covered in IO 1 and (II) future skills that are predicted to be required for the ongoing digital transformation. From these objectives, three research questions are derived:

RQ 1: What present customer management skills are missing in the first intellectual output?

RQ 2: What are the future customer management skills in B2B markets?

RQ 3: What is the state-of-the-art B2B customer management skills model?

To achieve the objectives and answer the research questions, the following tasks need to be completed:

1. Develop an interview guide based on the literature review and the theoretical framework established in IO 1.
2. Select best practice companies for interviews, considering criteria such as size, industry, and multinational presence.
3. Conduct interviews with B2B salespeople from best practice companies
4. Analysing and interpreting interview data.

4 Theoretical Background of Project Phase 2

This chapter explains all key terms used in this white paper.

4.1 B2B Sales

Business-to-business sales involve a company selling products or services to another company, contrasting with Business-to-Consumer (B2C) sales where companies sell directly to consumers. B2B sales are marked by educational/consultative selling, complex decision-making process, larger transaction values, and an emphasis on building and maintaining customer relationships (Hippner et al. 2011; Kober 2020; Purle et al. 2023).

4.1 Customer Relationship Management

Customer Relationship Management focuses on developing and building profitable, long-term customer relationships through customized marketing, sales, and after-service strategies, supported by technologies (Hippner et al. 2011). Empirical shows show that systematic customer relationship management can lead to competitive advantages (Purle et al. 2023).

4.2 Digitalization of B2B Sales

Digitalization encompasses the entire transformation of processes, organizations, communication, and business models through the use of technologies. Technologies facilitate sales in all phases, from customer search and acquisition, through initiation and completion of purchases, to customer support, service, and the after-sales area. They support the planning, control, execution, and monitoring of these phases (Kober 2022; Elste 2023). Mullins and Agnihotri (2022) categorize the digital tools available to salespeople into five categories: Customer-Relationship-Management, Information Technology, Social Media, Salesforce Automation, and Artificial Intelligence. Ahearne et al. (2005) discovered that utilizing digital technology enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of salespeople. For this reason, salespeople need to incorporate technologies like video calls, virtual demos, CRM management, social selling, and AI into their daily routines (Kober 2022; Mullins and Agnihotri 2022). However, the use of digital tools such as social media has changed the way salespeople interact with customers and manage customer relationships, demanding the development of new skills to adapt to the latest tools (Agnihotri et al. 2016; Itani et al. 2017; Rodriguez et al.

2016). Table 2 outlines technology advancements and their impact on customer management and the required skills for salespeople.

	Internet	Big Data & Analytics	Social Networks	Cloud
Customer management changes	The use of email, Teams, and Zoom in buyer-seller communication	CRM systems like HubSpot	Social media like LinkedIn	Cloud-based CRM
Skill changes/ requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - eNegotiation skills - eMeeting skills (Singh et al. 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New analytical skills in analyzing customer data from CRM system - More data-driven decision making (Peesker et al. 2022; Elhajjar et al. 2023) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social media skills - Social selling, relationship selling skills (Agnihotri et al. 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovation skills & vision - Technical proficiency (McKendrick 2013)

Table 2: Examples of changing B2B customer management skills(CustMaS Consortium 2023)

4.3 Sales Process

The sales process is a widely accepted tenet in the field of sales and applies to most B2B sales situations (Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Syam and Sharma 2018). The process varies from three to seven repeatable steps, assisting the sales team in managing their work (Ismo 2017; Fischer et al. 2022). Furthermore, the process is designed to create superior customer value, deliver customer experience, and increase sales performance (Andzulis et al. 2012; Ashley and Tuten 2015).

The seven-step sales process is a cornerstone in sales, providing the foundation for sales training, personal selling textbooks, and teaching selling classes (Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Ferreira et al. 2020). Ferreira et al. (2020) describe the process as prospecting potential customer (I), pre- (II), and approaching the customer (III), presentation (IV), overcoming

objections (V), closing the sale (VI), and follow-up (VII). Figure 2 illustrates the seven-step sales process. The steps will also be explained below the figure.

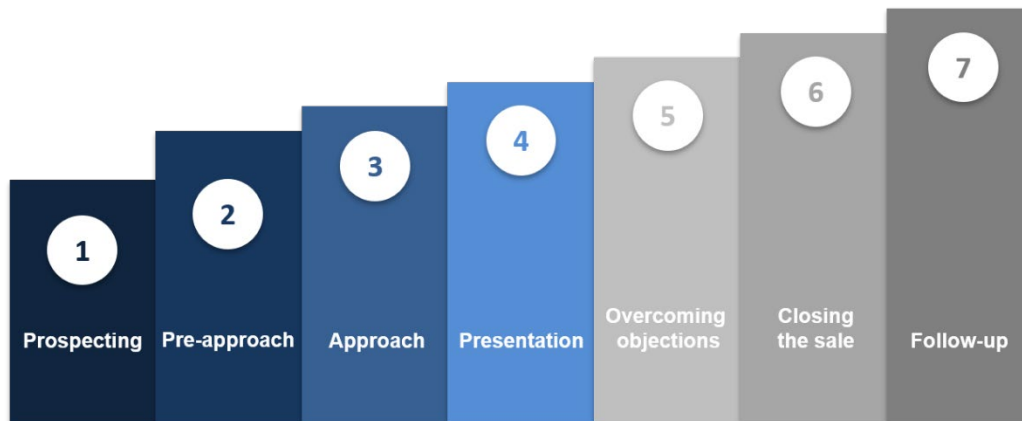


Figure 2: Seven-step sales process(adapted from (Burkinshaw 2018))

1. **Prospecting:** this step searches for new and potential customers. The objective of prospecting is to expand the customer base (Jolson and Wotruba 1992). Sales literature covers prospecting methods, such as networking, referrals, and cold canvassing. Prospecting typically includes qualifying the potential customer (Moncrief and Marshall 2005).
2. **Pre-approach:** this step involves all activities before visiting a prospect or customer. Salespeople prepare by researching prospects, understanding their needs, reviewing past interactions, and collecting relevant information for the sales call. This preparation also includes engaging with gatekeepers, studying both the individual and customer organization, and preparing for the approach and presentation (Moncrief and Marshall 2005).
3. **Approach:** in this step, salespeople focus on building rapport and trust with potential customers while also seeking a deeper understanding of how a lead might benefit from the company's products or services (Ferreira et al. 2020).
4. **Presentation:** the selling company showcases how the product or service can solve customer problems and tailors the offer to meet the demands of the prospective client. This often involves presenting a prototype of the proposed solution or product (Syam and Sharma 2018).
5. **Overcoming objections:** potential customers might have queries regarding competitors, delivery, or the product, service, or price itself. Salespeople's task is to

address these objections by understanding the client's concerns to close the deal (Ferreira et al. 2020).

6. **Closing the sale:** after overcoming all objections, salespeople request the sale, initiating the closing process (Moncrief and Marshall 2005). In this step, salespeople assist the client in making a timely final decision (Johnston and Marshall 2016).
7. **Follow-up:** this step involves processing, managing inventory, and fulfilling the order through supply and procurement systems. After completing the initial order, the follow-up covers tasks like identifying new client needs and potentially re-entering them into the sales funnel. The follow-up step also includes up and/or cross-selling activities (Ferreira et al. 2020).

Moreover, this step prioritizes the customer relationship instead of periodic follow-up activities. This involves continuous engagement and support to ensure customer satisfaction and address evolving customer needs (Moncrief and Marshall 2005).

4.4 B2B Sales Jobs

Stevens (2010) has identified four categories of B2B sales jobs: 1) the consultant, 2) the order taker, 3) the closer, and 4) the relationship builder. Indeed (2023) reports that there are 15 distinct sales positions within B2B sales. The positions are listed in Table 3.

B2B sales position	
Lead Generator Specialist	Outside Sales Representative
Sales Support Representative	Sales Engineer
Account Manager	Sales Director
Customer Success Manager	Regional Sales Manager
Inside Sales Representative	Lead Developer
Sales Development Representative	Vice President of Sales
Sales Manager	Chief Sales Officer
Sales Operations Manager	

Table 3: Types of B2B sales jobs(Indeed 2023)

4.5 Skills

In this chapter, the term „skill“ is defined, followed by descriptions of sales skills, digital skills, and skills anticipated to be required in the future.

4.5.1 General Definition

Skills are defined as the ability to utilize knowledge and know-how for accomplishing tasks and solving problems. In the literature, skills are formulated in terms such as “Ability to ...”, “Knows how to ...”, and “Searches ...”. Skills are categorized as either cognitive or practical. Cognitive skills include the use of intuitive, logical, and creative thinking, while practical skills include manual dexterity and the use of tools, materials, methods, and instruments (Vuorikari et al. 2022). Research within industrial and organizational psychology indicates that a worker's performance is strongly influenced by their skill level (Johnston and Marshall 2016).

4.5.2 Sales Skills

Different types of selling tasks require different kinds of skills (Johnston and Marshall 2016). In the literature, for example, the following sales skills are mentioned:

1. **Active listening skills:** the relationships between buyers and sellers are strengthened when sales professionals apply active listening skills (Gruber et al. 2008; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). According to Marshall et al. (2003), the ability to actively listen is the most important skill for salespeople's success.
2. **Well organized:** with the rise in complexity of sales jobs the ability of a salesperson to arrange and prioritize work has become a key success factor. Being well-organized is essential for effective time management (Johnston and Marshall 2016).
3. **Ability to adapt sales style:** adaptive selling involves modifying sales approaches during an interaction with a customer or over multiple customer interactions (Rapp et al. 2008). By being adaptable, a salesperson can more effectively engage in relationship selling, as it allows them to understand the needs and problems of customers and to propose suitable solutions (Goad and Jaramillo 2014).

4.5.3 Digital Skills

Digital skills are a set of abilities that enable people to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information/data. These skills are required to participate in today's digital world (Vuorikari et al. 2022). The Digital Competence Framework 2.0 defines the following 5 digital skill areas (Misheva 2021):

1. **Information and data literacy:** such as the ability to define information needs and locate, retrieve, store, and manage digital data
2. **Collaboration and communication:** such as the ability to interact, communicate, and collaborate with others using digital technologies
3. **Digital content creation:** skills in this area involve creating, editing, and enhancing digital content
4. **Safety:** such as the ability to ensure the protection of work devices, data, and sensitive information in digital environments
5. **Problem-solving:** ability to identify needs and resolve problems in digital environments

4.5.4 Future Skills

According to Ehlers (2020) „Future skills are competencies that allow individuals to solve complex problems in highly emergent contexts of action in a self-organised way and enable them to act (successfully). They are based on cognitive, motivational, volitional, and social resources, are value-based, and can be acquired in a learning process. “

In the context of B2B sales, future skills will revolve around the ability to blend digital proficiency with traditional sales skills (e.g. listening skills), to develop customer-centric solutions, and to adapt to changing market conditions (Donchak et al. 2023; Khatwani et al. 2023; Vinogradov 2023).

4.6 Sales Training

Sales training equips salespeople with the skills and knowledge required to sell products or services. Training programs cover topics such as product knowledge, legal/ethical issues, and time and territory management. The training can be delivered through several methods, mostly used are individual instruction, classes, seminars, and on-the-job training (Johnston and Marshall 2016).

In a recent McKinsey report, it has been highlighted that B2B sales organizations are facing a need to reskill their frontline reps. 97 % of companies surveyed are considering the upskilling of their sales force as necessary. Furthermore, less than half of the sales leaders surveyed believe that their sales representatives currently possess the right skills to succeed. Consequently, sales leaders are placing reskilling at the top of their immediate priorities (Cruz et al. 2022).

Advancements in technology and the dynamics of buyer-seller interactions require companies to train their salespeople to adapt to these changes. Sales experts must embrace a cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning skills to keep pace with emerging technologies (Mattila et al. 2021; Rayburn et al. 2021). However, the adoption of new technologies is often hindered by salespeople's perception of the limited value of their jobs. To counter this, companies must provide technology training to enhance sales teams' knowledge, skills, and attitudes, fostering a positive embrace of technological advancements (Rayburn et al. 2021).

4.7 Qualitative Interviews

In this chapter, the applied research method of qualitative semi-structured interviews is described.

4.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative Research encompasses various methodological approaches designed to deeply explore the social world by delving into individuals social and material conditions, perspectives, histories, and experiences. In qualitative research, data is collected by using methods such as observations, focus groups, and interviews (Kemparaj and Chavan 2013).

An interview involves a dialogue between two or more individuals where the interviewer asks questions and closely listens to the responses of the interviewee (Saunders et al. 2019). Semi-structured interviews, widely used in social sciences, are exploratory and rely on an interview guide to maintain focus on the main topic (Mashuri et al. 2022; Magaldi and Berler 2020). Their flexibility allows for new questions to emerge during the interview based on the interviewees' responses (Mashuri et al. 2022). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable a researcher to go deep for a discovery (Magaldi and Berler 2020).

4.7.2 Sampling

Qualitative studies typically select participants (probability samples) based on their ability to provide valuable insights, choosing people who are well-informed, articulate, introspective, and eager to communicate with the researcher. In qualitative research, sample size is not governed by established rules but is instead guided by the informational needs of the research (Kemparaj and Chavan 2013).

4.7.3 Preparing for Interviews

Achieving success in an interview depends on careful preparation. To ensure an effective interview process, it is crucial to provide interviewees with relevant information in advance. This involves sharing a list of themes or topics that will be addressed during the interview. By being informed about the topics of research, the interview partner has the opportunity to prepare for the interview. They can do so by collecting relevant organizational documents or information that contribute to the discussion. Furthermore, researchers should develop an interview guide that compiles a list of questions, ensuring they are logically ordered and presented in language easily understood by the interviewee. In summary, these preparatory steps facilitate a more engaging conversation and allow interviewees to contribute more meaningfully to the research objectives (Saunders et al. 2019).

4.7.4 Conducting the Interviews

During interviews, it is essential to build trust and credibility early on, with prepared documents helping to ease uncertainties and create an open atmosphere. Researchers should allow participants to freely express themselves by listening attentively and keeping their personal opinions in check, avoiding biased comments and nonverbal signals. Furthermore, using audio recordings and note-taking during the interviews enhances researcher concentration and data analysis efficiency (Adams 2015; Saunders et al. 2019).

4.7.5 Data Analysis

Before starting the data analysis, the collected raw data need to be cleaned and edited by the researcher (Drever 2003; Mashuri et al. 2022). Subsequently, various techniques are employed to reorganize the prepared data and to identify patterns within it. This step involves categorizing, coding, and quantifying data according to the research questions being

addressed (Drever 2003; Lapan et al. 2012). Finally, the researcher summarizes the findings and concludes the identified patterns (Drever 2003).

5 Benchmarking Cases

This research follows an exploratory approach, employing qualitative interviews for the benchmark. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed us to get insights from B2B sales experts' regarding the present and future skill requirements of B2B salespeople. The approach of interviewing sales experts has been widely applied in researching sales skills (Peesker et al. 2022; Razmak et al. 2023).

In the following chapters, the sample, the preparation, and the execution of the interviews will be described. Furthermore, the data analysis approach and the results will be explained.

5.1 Study Sample

A strategy was employed for selecting companies, that incorporated the following criteria: European-based multinational operating company, the company primarily operating within the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector in sectors with the highest value added (measured in 2019) in the European Union (Eurostat 2022). The ICT sector was included because companies in this industry possess the highest level of digitalization*.

The project requirements called for conducting interviews with experts from *best practice companies*. Despite a thorough review of the literature, a definition of *best practice companies* could not be identified for our purpose. Consequently, the research team decided to define companies that achieved a positive (greater than 0 %) sales Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) from 2016 to 2019 as *best practice companies*. A positive CAGR indicates that the company was able to increase its sales from 2016 to 2019 (Wilkens). The sales figures required for calculating the CAGR were obtained from the companies' published annual financial statements. The period was limited to 2019 to exclude the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the aftermath of the pandemic on supply chains, and the effects of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine on business operations. In selecting interview partners, the focus was placed on experienced sales experts, capable of evaluating future skills and identifying the present skills required for all B2B sales positions (see Table 3).

The strategy led to a final selection of 20 best practice companies. The companies were located as follows: 12 in Austria, 3 in Poland, 2 in Germany, and 1 each in France, Italy, and Greece. Each company nominated a single interviewee, leading to a total of 20 individual interviews. The final sample is illustrated in Table 4.

* Measured by the "Integration of Digital Technology" indicator of the Digital Economy and Society Index 2020.

Title of current position	Gender	Country	Enterprise size	Industry
Technical Sales & Business Developer	male	AT	medium-sized	Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi- trailers
Executive Director Sales	male	AT	large	Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi- trailers
Sales Specialist	male	AT	medium-sized	Information and Communication Technology
Sales Manager	male	AT	large	Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c.
Managing Director	male	AT	medium-sized	Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c.
Head of Sales	male	AT	large	Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply
Managing Director	male	DE	large	Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c.
Area Sales Manager	male	PL	medium-sized	Manufacture of fabricated metal products, except machinery and equipment
Head of Key Account	female	DE	large	Manufacture of food products
Sales & Marketing Manager	male	IT	large	Manufacture of food products
Managing Director	female	PL	micro	Manufacture of food products
Sales & Marketing Manager	male	PL	medium-sized	Manufacture of fabricated metal products, except machinery and equipment
Commercial Director	male	GR	medium-sized	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products
Managing Director	male	AT	large	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products
Head of Sales	male	AT	medium-sized	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products
Head of Sales	male	AT	large	Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply
Head of Sales	male	FR	medium-sized	Information and Communication Technology
Senior Customer Success Consultant	female	AT	medium-sized	Information and Communication Technology
Key Account Manager	male	AT	large	Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply
Managing Director	male	AT	micro	Information and Communication Technology

Table 4: Sample IO 2(own table)

5.2 Preparation

Before starting the interviews, the research team developed an interviewguide, an online survey, and supporting documents, which are described in more detail in the following chapters.

5.2.1 Interviewguide

For the interviews, we created an interview guide to enhance reliability in the data collection phase. The interview guide was divided into two sections: present and future. The present section was based on the seven steps of the sales process. First, we asked about the activities performed and the digital tools utilized by salespeople across the seven steps. Second, the questions delved into the skills required to execute the activities and to use the tools effectively. Third, we explored whether additional skills were necessary beyond the context of the seven-step sales process. In the future section, we asked about the skills that will be essential for future trends and challenges.

Pre-tests with both a sales expert and a researcher were conducted, to obtain feedback on the questions and interview process while ensuring validity.

5.2.2 Online Survey

To reduce interview lengths and obtain more detailed information about the interview partners, an online survey was created. The survey included questions regarding the interviewees' age and years of professional experience, among other topics. The survey was sent out to the interviewees before the meeting. All interview partners answered the survey.

5.2.3 Supporting Documents

To adhere to ethical norms and privacy regulations, interview partners were sent a consent form. The consent form included information about voluntary participation in the study, the use and storage of data, and the protection of privacy. All interview partners signed the consent form.

In a one-pager, the CustMaS project, its goals, and expected outcomes were described. Furthermore, the term “skill” was defined including a description of sales-related skills. A second one-pager detailed the seven steps of the sales process. Both documents were sent to the interviewees in advance, ensuring they could understand the conversation's context and keep up with the interview's flow.

5.3 Performing the Interviews

The interview series started in March and concluded by May 2023. At the beginning of the interview, interviewees were introduced to the CustMaS project and the interview process was explained. Subsequently, questioning on required skills was conducted guided by the interview guide. The interviews were carried out both online and on-site, lasting an average of 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded for data analysis.

5.4 Transcription and Analysis of the Data

The recorded interviews were transcribed both through the use of the software “f4x” and manually. In the transcription process, we followed the rules established by (Kuckartz 2014).

The transcripts were analysed by using MAXQDA. We adopted an inductive approach, capturing the skills emphasized by the sales experts in an open coding style. This approach allowed us to identify the skills without being biased by predefined skills identified in IO 1.

The coding was carried out by two researchers. Before starting coding, the research team defined a consensus on how to code the skills consistently. Regular meetings were held to address any individual differences in coding, thereby enhancing the consistency of the coding process and ensuring a transparent and traceable analysis approach.

Each coder entered the coded skills in a shared *reference document*. This document was used as a foundation to identify skills not identified in IO 1.

6 Results

In the following chapters, the present skills not addressed in the previous project phase (IO 1), the identified future skills, and the final B2B customer management skill model are documented.

6.1 Present Skills

To identify the customer management skills missing in the first intellectual output (RQ 1), skills in the reference document were matched with those from IO 1 (see Table 1). This comparison was conducted by two researchers and the approach is illustrated in Figure 3. Through this process, six present skills not mentioned in the previous project phase (IO 1) were identified.

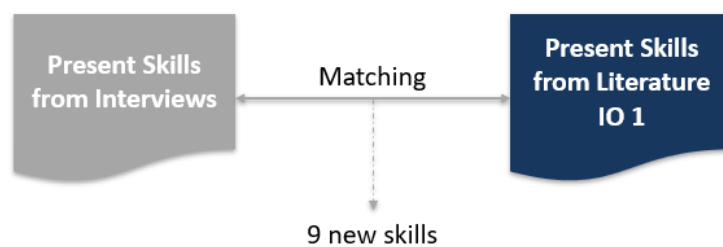


Figure 3: Matching present skills(own illustration)

Table 5 lists the 9 new present skills.

Human/Interpersonal Skills	Technical Skills
Language Skills	Interviewing Skills
Being trustworthy	Goal-oriented approach
Open-mindedness	Decision-making skills
Integrity/transparency	
Curiosity	
Ambition/Enthusiasm	

Table 5: New present skills(own table)

6.2 Future Skills

As outlined in Chapter 3, the research aimed to identify future customer management skills essential for the ongoing digital transformation (RQ 2). The interviewees mentioned a total of 60 future skills, which are listed in Table 6. These future skills were compared to those identified in IO 1 (see Table 1), including the 9 new present skills (see Table 5). Through this comparison, 22 of the future skills were also identified as present skills. Consequently, 38 future skills are not required at present. They are marked grey in Table 6.

Conceptual Skills	Human/Interpersonal Skills	Technical Skills
Build good connections	Adaptability	Accept digitization
Customer-centric mindset	Agility	Ability to differentiate between AI and human response
Data-driven mindset	Analytical skills	Ability to interact with AI
Digital selling skills	Awareness of transformation	Ability to recognize AI
Ethical selling	Being authentic	Being serious towards negotiations
Functional sales skills	Being dynamic	Cybersecurity awareness
Product knowledge	Being enthusiastic	Data literacy
Responsible selling	Being goal-oriented	Development of tools
Solution selling	Being hard enough	Digital skills
Strategic thinking	Being open-minded	Having specific knowledge
Understanding customer needs	Build bridges between functions and areas of knowledge	Holistic knowledge
	Collaboration	Presentation skills
	Communication skills	Problem-solving skills
	Continuous learning	Sales pitch
	Creativity	Speak different languages
	Cultural skill	Technical skills

	Emotional intelligence	
	Empathy	
	Flexibility	
	Having good personality	
	Interpersonal skills	
	Intrinsic motivation	
	Listening skills	
	Multitasking skills	
	Patience	
	People skills	
	Questioning	
	Quick learning	
	Relationship-building	
	Resilience	
	Rhetoric skills	
	Team Work	
	Trust building	

Table 6: Future skills(own table)

6.3 B2B Customer Management Skill Model

Table 7 presents the final state-of-the-art B2B customer management skills model and answers the third research question (see Chapter 3). The model includes skills from IO 1, along with the 9 new present skills (marked in bold), and 38 future skills (marked in grey).

Conceptual Skills	Human/Interpersonal Skills	Technical Skills
Account management/ strategic selling	Adaptiveness	Business case development
Business and financial acumen	Analytical skills	Closing
Business ethics	Collaboration	Follow-up
Challenging sales skills	Communication	Implementation planning/ project management
Consultative sales skills	Coping with stress	Internal system literacy
Customer engagement	Creativity	Negotiation
Customer success management	Emotional intelligence	Presentation
Entrepreneurial skills	First impression/initial impact	Prospecting
Funnel management	Interpersonal skills/ relationship management	Social Selling
Industry research and value development	Leadership (formal and informal)	Technology
Objection handling	Learning	Writing skills and reading literacy
Orchestration	Listening	Interviewing Skills
Product knowledge	Personal skills	Goal-oriented approach
Solution selling	Personality identification and communication impact	Decision-making skills
Build good connections	Prioritization	Accept digitization
Customer-centric mindset	Process improvement/ problem-solving	Ability to differentiate between AI and human response
Data-driven mindset	Questioning	Ability to interact with AI
Digital selling skills	Language Skills	Ability to recognize AI
Ethical selling	Being trustworthy	Being serious towards negotiations
Functional sales skills	Open-mindedness	Cybersecurity awareness

Responsible selling	Integrity/transparency	Data literacy
Strategic thinking	Curiosity	Development of tools
Understanding customer needs	Ambition/Enthusiasm	Digital skills
	Agility	Having specific knowledge
	Awareness of transformation	Holistic knowledge
	Being authentic	Sales pitch
	Being dynamic	Speak different languages
	Being hard enough	
	Build bridges between functions and areas of knowledge	
	Cultural skill	
	Empathy	
	Flexibility	
	Having good personality	
	Intrinsic motivation	
	Multitasking skills	
	Patience	
	Relationship-building	
	Resilience	
	Team Work	

Table 7: B2B customer management skill model(own table)

7 Summary and Outlook

The second phase of the project aimed to extend the B2B customer management skills model created during the first project phase. This extension involved adding both missing present skills and those anticipated to be relevant in the future. To achieve this, interviews were conducted with sales experts. A total of 20 interviews were carried out, involving B2B sales experts from European best practice companies.

Through conducting the interviews, 9 present and 38 future skills were identified that were not documented in the skill model from the first project phase. Integrating the identified skills with those from the first project phase yields a final state-of-the-art B2B customer management skill model encompassing 89 skills.

In the next project phase, the final skill model will undergo validation through a quantitative test. This will involve conducting a Pan-European survey to identify skills that are key to success. This way it will become possible to identify those skills which can be successfully distinguished from those of less successful sales personnel.

After the third phase, a curriculum focused on the education of customer management skills will be developed, tested, and refined. Finally, a MOOC will be launched.

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Glossary

AI	Artificial Intelligence
B2B	Business to Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRM	CustomerRelationship Management
CustMaS	Customer Management Skills in Digitalizing B2B Markets
e. g.	Exempli gratia
et al.	et alii
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IO	Intellectual Output
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
RQ	Research Question