A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SELLING SKILLS AND SALES MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SALESPERSON PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT
The rapid growth of organisational complexity and technology sophistication has altered the dynamics of selling and sales management within organisations. The scope of salespersons' activities has shifted from the transactional view of selling to customers-centricity and value creation. This review sought to provide a critical analysis of the empirical evidence regarding selling skills and sales management practices that influence salesperson performance in today's organisations. This study focused on measuring adaptive selling behaviours, emotional intelligence, customer-oriented selling behaviour, digital selling skills, customer relationship management, customer success management, and organisational sales management support practices related to salesperson effectiveness. A critical literature review method was used to review the recent empirical evidence from personal selling and sales management literature streams. The results of this review revealed the positive impact of adaptive selling behaviours, customer orientation, emotional intelligence, and digital communication skills on salesperson performance through customer connection, relationship quality, and value creation. The study also identified sales management drivers such as leadership support, training and development, performance management, flexibility, and customer success management practices that facilitate the successful application of selling skills in salesperson effectiveness. Additionally, much of the existing literature reviewed variables individually instead of integrated models showing how behaviours, emotions, technology, and management work together. This study offers contributions by providing a critical overview of recent literature on contemporary selling skills and sales management support practices. It also highlights theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps such as digitalisation and AI-enabled selling, ethical selling behaviours, and emerging market contexts. Practical Implications. The review reveals that for long-term sustainable performance in sales, both selling skills and organisational sales management support practices are essential. Sales managers and researchers can build upon the identified gaps to advance theory and practice on salesperson effectiveness.
Keywords
Selling skills; sales management; adaptive selling; emotional intelligence; customer-oriented selling behaviour; CRM; customer success management; sales performance.

1.1 Introduction

Changes in the current business environment have significantly altered perceptions of salespeople and sales management. Salespeople were once thought of as order getters. However, this mentality does not apply in the contemporary technological world of extreme competition and customer centricity. Nowadays, high performing sales positions are reserved for those who can adapt to change, pick up on emotional signals, and emphasize customer centricity. Salespeople must also be knowledgeable in technology and building strategic relationships. The transactional buy and sell mindset have been replaced by one of creating value through partnerships with customers (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020; Kowalkowski et al., 2025).

Customers have more access to information at their fingertips through technology. They can conduct research about what they want to purchase before even speaking to a salesperson. For this reason, many sales professionals and managers wonder how to even identify top performers. Sales teams are no longer able to know every detail about a product and sell it. High performers in sales learn about customer needs and provide personalized solutions while maintaining mutually advantageous relationships (Czinkota et al., 2021). Because of this change in the business world, much research has been done to analyze the effects of a salesperson's behavior and personality. It is evident that salespeople who can adapt, are customer-oriented, emotionally intelligent, and have strong relationship building skills perform better.

All things considered, flexibility in selling attracted the most research attention. Flexibility refers to a salesperson' ability to modify communication style, content about the product, and the overall sales approach based on customer needs and the selling situation. Research found that flexibility increased sales effectiveness because sales representatives aligned their sales approach with various customer expectations (Yeo and Jan, 2022; Chang and Lin, 2024). However, all this attention has also attracted some controversy to flexibility in selling. Some researchers believed that too much focus on flexibility will lead salespersons to be too 'slick,' which can cause ethical problems. Therefore, salespeople should be flexible but not lose sight of the selling context or company ethics (Yeo and Jan, 20 22).

Emotional intelligence received significant attention because it is believed to be the predictor of salesperson performance on the job. However, while previous studies examined emotional intelligence' direct impact on sales performance. Recent research suggests emotional intelligence affects salesperson performance more indirectly by influencing selling-adapting behaviors and developing customer relationships (Wisker and Poulis, 2014).

As a result, future research needs to assess selling skills collaboratively rather than individually. The overlap between selling skills exemplifies today's sales complexities and how reductive previous explanations of salesperson performance can be. Sales behaviors have also been accelerated by digitalization. The introduction of digital communications, virtual selling platforms, CRM systems, and other technologies such as AI and data analytics has changed the game on salesperson effectiveness (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 20 20). Salespeople do not merely interact differently with customers; the expectations of their responsiveness and engagement levels have transformed. As a result, sales managers are now tasked with developing salesforces proficient in both traditional and digital sales methods.

In addition to individual factors, recent research suggest managerial practices heavily influence salesperson performance as well. Organizational factors such as leader support, flexibility, learning opportunities, and monitoring of performance significantly influence how salespeople perform their job (Charoensukmongkol and Pandey, 20 23; Kowalkowski et al., 20 25). Therefore, it can be argued that we are beginning to view sales performance as less of an individual success and more of a collective one with salespeople' personal competencies and company enabling factors at the forefront. Despite the growing body of research on sales, selling, and related topics, the knowledge remains siloed within different theories, methodologies, and contexts. Many researchers analyze individual variables without consideration for how selling skills may overlap or management practices may influence those skills. Furthermore, advances in technology, CSME, and servitization have presented sales with new business models that older theories may not apply to. Therefore, there is a need to synthesize this new pool of evidence on selling skills and management practices to understand how they are related to salesperson performance.

Therefore, this review will critically analyze the current literature on selling skills and sales management practices to determine its implications on salesperson performance within organizations. By summarizing recent empirical and conceptual research, we can begin to understand how selling skills, sales management practices, and outside factors influence salespeople' ability to be effective in today's business world.

Sales remain essential for companies as they increase revenue, improve customer retention, and provide a competitive advantage. However, organizations still struggle to achieve elite and sustainable sales performance despite significant investments in training and technology. The reason behind this puzzle attracts the interest of many researchers these days.

Traditionally, research was dedicated to discovering traits of an elite individual salesperson, including product knowledge and communication skills. However, knowledge alone is no longer sufficient in the current sales environment. Markets have evolved into more complex and customer-centric ecosystems. Recent research suggests that sales representatives should possess unique skills to excel nowadays. Adaptability to different situations, empathy with customers, ability to utilize novel digital technologies – these are just some skills that increasingly predict success (Czinkota et al., 2021; Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020; Wisker and Poulis, 2014). Moreover, there is an evident shift in selling towards customer success management (sales professionals' efforts are becoming more focused on ensuring the customers succeed in using the purchased product or service) (Czinkota et al., 2021).

Studies found that many selling skills positively correlate with sales performance, but research findings are fragmented and sometimes even conflicting. Adaptive selling leads to better sales performance; however, overusing this skill may encourage unethical selling behaviors (Yeo and Jan, 2022). Emotional intelligence is also believed to be critical for salespeople; however, research evidence has shown that the impact of emotional intelligence is dependent on other variables and can be rather indirect (Wisker and Poulis, 2014). Such ambiguity in the literature complicates organizational efforts to understand which skills should be improved when attempting to enhance their salespeople's performance.

Another problem is related to increased digitalization of sales activities. In today's world, sales occur in virtual environments and channels more frequently. Digital technologies allow boosting sales performance; however, little is known about adapting traditional selling skills to digital environments (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). As such, organizations frequently invest in new technologies without understanding how these tools align with salespeople' skills and management practices.

Furthermore, most articles today concentrate on salesperson-level variables with little regard to organizational and managerial drivers of sales performance. Studies show sales performance to be affected by sales management through many factors such as management support, agile leadership style, customer success management, control, and company culture (Charoensukmongkol and Pandey, 20 23; Kowalkowski et al., 20 25). However, these variables have not yet been researched collectively as they interact with each other to form a comprehensive sales performance system.

In other words, we do not yet know how selling skills and sales management work together to affect sales performance in organizations today. This creates a gap in literature because we cannot progress theoretically or practically to improve sales performance when today's businesses are complex and affected by digitalization, customer needs, and competition. To address this gap, a critical review can be done to compile literature, analyze the similarities and differences, and gain a better understanding of what factors cause salespeople to perform.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this review is to critically examine the influence of selling skills and sales management practices on salesperson performance in contemporary organisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Selling Skills

Skills include behavioural skills, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and technical know-how applied by salespeople to understand customer needs, demonstrate product relevance, build rapport and achieve organizational sales targets. Selling skills used to be persuasion skills, product knowledge skills, prospecting skills and closing skills. The selling environment today has evolved due to market dynamism, technological advancements and informed customers. Selling skills that lead to successful outcomes today are more extensive than before (Czinkota et al., 2021). Books written several years ago on sales focused on selling skills as skills required to close a sale. This was based on the perspective that sales success was all about persuasive conversations and product knowledge. Some people do not agree with this view because customers these days can access information easily and conduct substantial research before interacting with salespeople (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). Salespeople these days are not merely viewed as providers of information. Customers see salespeople as advisors as well as solution providers.

The more recent publications point out dimensions of selling skills to include adaptive selling skills, customer orientation skills, emotional intelligence skills, digital communication skills, relationship skills and problem-solving skills. Adaptive selling skills are how salespeople change communication style and sales behaviours in view of the needs of the customer and the situation at hand. Research shows that adaptive selling contributes to sales effectiveness since salespeople who display this skill adjust to what the customer needs (Yeo and Jan, 2022; Chang and Lin, 2024). However, others argue that adaptive selling may not always be positive. According to Yeo and Jan (2022), although adaptive selling leads to improved sales performance, it could lead to more salespeople engaging in opportunistic behaviour by focusing on short-term gains and overlooking ethical considerations. This contrasts with what many authors highlight about adaptive selling.

Customer-oriented skills are also key selling skills. Customer-oriented selling entails putting the customers' needs first rather than looking into how the customer can help you achieve your sales target. Customer-oriented salespeople have better customer outcomes than salespeople with lower levels of customer orientation (Shafiq et al., 2017; Yeo and Jan, 2022). On the flip side, others have argued that customer-oriented behaviour can create goal incongruence if sales managers push their salespeople to generate revenue yet customers want the salesperson to consult for free.

Emotional intelligence skills have also been highlighted as important selling skills. Emotional intelligence allows one to perceive emotions and manage them in interactions with others. From the research done by Wisker and Poulis (2014), it was shown that emotional intelligence leads to better sales performance through its effect on adaptive selling behaviour and not directly. This means that EI is not a guarantee of better sales performance if the salesperson lacks other skills.

Selling skills have been changing over time due to technological advancements. Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020) define digital communication skills as salespeople effectively communicating and interpreting customer cues through limited physical interaction and establishing connections through technological channels. Peesker, Ryals and Kerr (2024) find that analytical curiosity, empathetic citizenship and disciplined drive are personal characteristics that determine digital selling success. From these studies, it is evident that the basic selling skills have to be coupled with technology skills to become efficient in sales.

There is limited consensus in the selling skills literature on what specific skills lead to selling success. While different authors highlight different skills, there is no reference to how these skills affect performance when combined. Research has also focused on individual dimensions of skills. Future research could look into all these skills and highlight how they work together to create salesperson effectiveness. This would help in both a theoretical perspective and from a sales manager who wants to develop their salesforce.

2.2 Concept of Sales Management

Sales management involves the planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling personal selling efforts to accomplish business goals. Sales management includes; recruitment, training, motivation, performance reviews, designing compensation packages, sales territory management, customer relationship management, and sales planning (Czinkota et al., 2021). Sales management has been viewed from the perspective of getting the

salesforce to reach set targets. Thus, sales managers were to control the salesforce and ensure the sales force achieves set objectives. With changing selling environments, today, sales management is viewed from a different perspective. Selling has moved from informing customers to enabling customer success. With this in mind, sales managers should focus on creating an environment where the salesforce can learn from each other, collaborate, innovate and drive customer success (Kowalkowski et al., 2025).

Sales managers play a pivotal role in enabling salesperson effectiveness. Charoensukmongkol and Pandey (20 23) showed that salesperson flexibility can lead to positive performance outcomes when management teams are equally flexible. This suggests that salespersons cannot produce extraordinary results under organisational conditions that do not enable these capabilities. This runs contrary to the common belief that salesperson performance depends largely on individual knowledge and skills. Sales managers today play a critical role in enabling servitization and customer success management. Supporting customer value creation along the entire customer journey (not just now of sale) has become integral to the role of sales management. Kowalkowski et al. (20 25) suggest that managing for value creation requires sales managers to coordinate value creation efforts across organisational functions such as marketing, operations, IT and customer service. In other words, sales management has transformed from being an organisational function unto itself into a cross-functional leadership role.

Technology also continues to influence sales management practice. Advanced CRM tools allow managers to track performance metrics, predict demand, tailor offerings to individual customers, automate sales communications, and engage in sales analytics (Czinkota et al., 20 21). However, research shows that technology investments do not guarantee superior performance. For instance, many organisations fail to achieve the anticipated return on CRM investments because they prioritise implementation over the "behavioural and organisational changes needed to support CRM use and encourage customer participation" (Czinkota et al., 20 21, p. 205). Therefore, technology should be viewed as an enabler, not a replacement, for effective management.

Research by Keshavarz et al. (20 24) showed that sales occupation experience creates significant value for organisations and that sales management careers follow specific development paths. This contradicts a common belief that anybody who makes a good salesperson will make a good sales manager. The path dependency of sales management careers suggest that sales managers require different skills than salespeople. Selling requires specific leadership skills and the ability to coordinate cross-functional resources and make strategic decisions that differ from regular sales activities.

The academic literature is beginning to recognise the importance of sales management in determining salesperson performance. However, much of this research studies sales management functions independently of each other and does not always consider management in the context of other organisational elements like culture or technology. Furthermore, the literature has not examined many sales management trends that have emerged over the last few years, such as digital transformation, remote selling, and the use of AI in sales. For this reason, it is essential that future studies take a holistic view of sales management.

2.3 Adaptive Selling and Sales Performance

Adaptive selling can be defined as the degree to which a salesperson adapts their selling behaviours, communication style and interaction approach to meet the needs of different customers and sales situations. This concept was first introduced in the sales literature to address the ineffectiveness of generic selling strategies in markets where customers have diverse needs, preferences, and buying processes. Adaptive selling involves understanding customers' unique needs and adapting selling strategies to better meet those needs.

The primary theoretical foundation for adaptive selling is contingency theory. Contingency theory posits that there is no single set of best practices that lead to effectiveness. Organisations must be aware of the situation (i.e., customers) and modify their behaviour to accommodate customer needs. Although it was formulated in the context of organisational design, the principles of contingency theory are applicable to the salesperson-customer interaction. Empirical research has backed up these assumptions. Shafiq et al. (2017) showed that adaptive selling correlates with sales performance better than any other salesperson skill. Yeo and Jan (20 22) found that adaptive selling leads to better sales performance by enabling salespeople to adapt to shifting customer expectations.

While the direct positive effect of adaptive selling on sales performance has been established, recent studies propose that its effect may be indirect. For example, Chang and Lin (20 24) theorised that adaptive selling could also improve relationship performance. Their study showed that adaptive selling is positively related to customers'satisfaction with the salesperson and commitment to the relationship. Thus, adaptive selling leads to both immediate sales performance and long-term relational performance. Although several studies have shown that emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be better at adaptive selling (Wisker and Poulis, 2014), no study has examined whether adaptive selling mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and sales performance.

However, there have been some criticisms on adaptive selling being represented as an entirely positive behaviour. Research by Yeo and Jan (2022) discovered that although adaptive selling positively affected performance, it also heightened opportunistic behaviour in individuals. Adaptive salespeople may increase their knowledge on a

customer to exploit their weaknesses or focus too heavily on short-term goals rather than upholding ethical business practices. These findings emphasise the ethical implications of adaptive selling and propose that organisations may need to implement controls to encourage adaptation while preventing unethical conduct.

Organisations also play a large role in the success of adaptive selling. Research done by Charoensukmongkol and Pandey (2023) shows that salesperson flexibility does not always improve performance if the management structure is not also flexible. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) goes on to show that adaptive selling is especially crucial in servitized contexts because customer value creation is a joint and continuous process that hinges on customised offerings. This stream of research proposes that adaptive selling should not be seen as an individual skill, but as behaviour that is affected by organisational systems, leadership and the situation at hand.

Adaptive selling is one of the most consistent predictors of sales performance. However, there are still gaps in the literature. Many studies have used cross-sectional methods, providing little to no insight on long-term effects of adaptation. While research has been done on topics such as ethics and digital technologies in relation to adaptive selling, it is still quite siloed. Future research should consider how these factors work in conjunction with adaptive selling.

2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Sales Performance

Emotional intelligence has quickly become one of the most talked about psychological constructs in sales articles for its purported ability to explain variances in salesperson effectiveness above and beyond standard metrics such as IQ, product knowledge, and selling experience. Emotional intelligence is the capacity of individuals to perceive, understand, regulate, and leverage emotions from themselves and others during interpersonal interactions. Selling activities are heavily reliant on social and interpersonal skills since salespeople must interact daily with customers, co-workers, and organisational stakeholders to be successful. Due to this belief, many researchers have explored emotional intelligence's role concerning sales performance.

Older models of selling ability presumed that sales success hinged on technical skill-sets such as product knowledge, persuasion, and prospecting skill. Critics of this perspective argued that there was no way to determine why salespeople with similar working conditions and skillsets produced vastly different levels of performance. For this reason, academics began to explore behavioural aspects of selling that might influence how salespeople connect with customers. Emotional intelligence rose to popularity as sales because researchers believed it could help explain how salespeople understood customer emotions and built rapport (Wisker and Poulis, 2014).

Overall, literature has agreed with this sentiment and found emotional intelligence to play a pivotal role in sales performance. Salespeople who understand emotions and act accordingly are typically better at recognising customer emotions and acting accordingly, addressing customer pain, and building relationship-based trust. These skills lead to higher customer engagement and satisfaction levels from customers. Shafiq et al. (2017) further concluded that emotional intelligence was vital to salesperson effectiveness because salespeople with high EI levels could better empathise with their customers and maintain long-lasting relationships. These conclusions help back the theories behind relationship marketing and its premise that interpersonal relationships are crucial to success.

More recently some research has come out that has added nuance to the relationship between EI and performance. Wisker and Poulis (2014) go against the grain in presuming that there exists a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and sales performance. Through their research they were able to conclude that emotional intelligence leads to better sales performance by driving adaptive selling behaviour. Salespeople with high EI are better at understanding customer needs and adapting their sales pitch to fit the needs of the customer. EI is less of a driver for performance than a moderator that allows other psychological constructs to improve performance. Theoretical implications of this study are crucial because they conclude that EI by itself does not guarantee excellent performance unless that emotional intelligence is used to further display behavioural changes.

EI may not only affect salesperson performance on closing sales but may affect other performance-based metrics. The changing landscape of selling has shifted towards prioritising longer-lasting customer relationships, customer success, and collaborative value creation. B2B selling today requires sellers to create and maintain lasting relationships with customers. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) go on to state that salespeople should act more as customer advisors and solutionaries rather than sellers. To do this, salespeople need a high level of empathy and emotional sensitivity and awareness to ensure customers feel comfortable working with the company on a long-term basis.

Critiques of emotional intelligence have also been raised over the years. Firstly, there has been no consistent agreement on what constitutes EI and how to measure it. Many studies use different tests to measure emotional intelligence which makes it difficult to compare and build off of past literature. Secondly, many EI studies use self-reported data from participants. This could cause bias as people may answer questions to seem like they're a higher EI. Thirdly, a majority of these studies use cross-sectional forms of research. While cross-sectional research can show a relationship between two variables, it cannot prove causation. Causation could be claimed that EI causes better sales performance or vice versa. For these reasons, some may believe the halo of EI has been blown out of proportion.

The rise of digital selling environments may also play a factor in EI and sales performance. Digital sales interactions limit face-to-face contact and make it more challenging for salespeople to pick up on emotional cues. Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020) believe that digital selling requires salespeople to have a different type of emotional intelligence. This emotional intelligence will be drawn through limited pictures and sounds. For this reason, future research should focus on the role that EI plays in digital selling environments and if EI plays a different role.
In conclusion, EI is crucial to sales performance; however, it does not affect performance by itself. EI helps salespeople better understand customers leading to better relationship management and adaptive selling which ultimately leads to better sales performance. Future research should aim to find what mediates the relationship between EI and sales performance and whether it differs from organisation to organisation.

2.5 Customer-Oriented Selling Essay

Customer-oriented selling is a selling approach that puts customers' needs first instead of prioritising short-term sales goals. Customer-oriented selling values long-term relationships, customer satisfaction, trust, and creating value for customers. The term stems from relationship marketing which suggests organisations gain competitive advantages by creating long-term customer relationships.
Traditionally, selling organisations used aggressive selling approaches that prioritised revenue maximisation at all costs. As such, selling behaviours focused on persuading customers, negotiating, and closing sales even if customer needs were not met. Detractors of aggressive selling argued that these behaviours destroyed customer trust and lowered organisational performance levels. In response, scholars began encouraging organisations to practice customer-oriented selling (Czinkota et al., 2021).
Customer-oriented selling posits that salespeople should prioritise customers' needs above other business concerns. In practice, this means salespeople become customer advocates who actively listen to customers, understand their problems, and offer solutions to their problems. Yeo and Jan (2022) state that customer-oriented salespeople focus less on offering solutions and more on understanding customers' problems. Customer-oriented sales behaviours improve trust between buyers and sellers.
Research consistently shows positive effects of customer-oriented selling on sales performance. Shafiq et al. (2017) discovered customer orientation improves salesperson effectiveness because salespeople understand their customers. Yeo and Jan (2022) also determined customer-oriented selling improved sales performance while also lowering opportunistic behaviour among salespeople. Their findings are important because it shows selling orientations influence ethical behaviour within sales teams.
Customer-oriented selling creates value for customers, leading to increased customer retention. According to research, acquiring a new customer is more expensive than retaining existing customers. Czinkota et al. (20 21) state customer retention creates higher profits because loyal customers do not need much attention from marketing teams. By extension, customer-oriented selling allows organisations to boost performance by creating customer loyalty and minimising customer churn.
Critics of customer-oriented selling claim selling too much into the customer's side can cause problems for sales management. Salespeople work in performance-driven environments where sales quotas and revenue numbers must be met. As such, focusing too much on customers can hurt a salesperson's ability to reach their sales goals. This raises the question of how much customer advocacy is too much?
Servitization might be the reason customer-oriented selling will become popular. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) suggests companies will compete by how well they can create customer success. Creating customer success requires selling firms to meet customer expectations throughout their customer journey. Hence, customer-oriented selling will continue to be practised because it encourages salespeople to interact with their customers regularly.
Technology has also impacted customer-oriented selling. Many CRM systems allow salespeople to track customers' online behaviours and create personalised offerings. Although customising makes it easier to understand customers, customers are increasingly concerned about how organisations use their data. Bharadwaj and Shipley (20 20) found when using customer-oriented selling, sales managers should balance personalisation with customer trust.
In conclusion, customer-oriented selling is one of the most supported selling approaches. Its effects on performance, ethics, and customer satisfaction are well documented. Although future research should consider how selling is impacted by increasing pressure to perform, technology, and customer expectations.

2.6 Digital Selling and Technology

Due to technological improvements in digital equipment and hardware, digital selling has evolved and can be described as the use technological platforms, digital media, data and digital/virtual selling tools to sell to customers. Digital selling transforms face-to-face sales interactions into technology-based channels of communication and transaction. Digital selling also transforms how salespeople interact with customers and communicate value. In this section, we highlight how organisations sell using digital technologies. Sales research has evolved to explore how digital technologies impact selling activities.

Traditional selling practices were developed at a time where most customer contact with salespeople occurred person to person. For instance, selling was once defined as interpersonal communications; product presentations and demonstrations were completed face-to-face with customers. Developments in customer relationship management (CRM) software and technology, social media platforms, video conferencing software, artificial intelligence(AI), and predictive analytics programmes have influenced how salespeople interact with customers (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). Salespeople are now expected to learn new skills on top of knowing how to sell traditionally.

Organisations can benefit from selling digitally in many ways. Firstly, digital technologies allow salespeople to store customer data and analyse customer information to provide tailored customer experiences. Customer relationship management tools allow salespeople to profile customers, monitor behaviour, stage customer journeys and tailor customer experiences (Czinkota et al., 2021). Secondly, digital communication channels allow sellers to transcend geographical boundaries and reach customers in different locations easier. Lastly, AI computer programmes allow sellers to leverage data to make decisions on what customers prefer and will buy in the future (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). At the same time, digitalisation has created new challenges for organisations. Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020) claim that selling remotely through online channels inhibits salespeople from receiving social cues such as body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures from customers. Salespeople may find it hard to establish trust, read social cues, and manage complex sales meetings. Researchers may have to consider if technology can provide the same relational benefits as face-to-face selling. The recent integration of digital technologies into daily business activities has been spurred by changes in the external business environment. Charoensukmongkol and Pandey (2023) provide empirical evidence that salesperson adaptability has increased in importance to organisational performance as organisations adjusted to virtual and digital selling. From this study, we can infer that selling professionals need to act a certain way if they want to excel in unstable environments even if they know how to use technology.

Scholars have begun to unearth problems with being digitally dependent. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools help salespeople record information and analyze customer data. However, studies have found that CRM technology does not always meet companies' expectations (Czinkota et al., 2021). Czinkota et al. (2021) states that managers focus on the technological aspects of CRM implementation and neglect the behavioural and organisational changes that need to occur to utilise the technology. Employees may require training on how to use the new digital tools, leaders may have to incentivise use and existing processes may need amendments to accommodate digitalisation. This example shows that technology alone does not determine if a digital programme will be prosperous in the organisation. Digital advancements have also shaped customer expectations. Customers expect businesses to respond quickly to inquiries, provide hyper-personalised experiences, and be available on multiple channels. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) suggest that selling has evolved from interacting with customers occasionally to continuously managing customers' success. Business can no longer see digital channels as just another selling tool. Digital selling will continue to evolve how salespeople interact with customers. Digital technology allows businesses to sell more efficiently, personalise their offerings and communicate with more customers. Although digital selling creates opportunities for organisations, it also creates obstacles such as lack of trust, communication difficulties, and reliance on technology that may not pan out. Future researchers should explore how businesses can integrate digital tools while maintaining the human aspect of selling.

2.7 Management Support

Management support includes organisational resources, managerial actions, training and development efforts, performance management systems, and managerial philosophy that help salespeople perform better. New research indicates that how good salespeople are at their job is affected by organisational factors that enable or restrict employees from acting a certain way. Therefore, management support has been shown to affect salesperson performance significantly. In the past, sales management entailed monitoring, supervising and controlling salespeople's performance. Managers ensured that quotas were set, evaluated performance, and held salespeople accountable for reaching their goals. However, managers have a responsibility to support salespeople to enable them to perform their best (Czinkota et al., 2021). Sales managers support salespeople by coaching, mentoring, and removing any obstacles that may be restricting their performance.

Research shows that management support directly affects sales performance. Yeo and Jan (2022) showed that top management support has a positive effect on adaptive selling; providing salespeople with psychological security, freedom, and organisational support motivates them to adapt to each customer. Moreover, Charoensukmongkol and Pandey (2023) showed that salesperson flexibility only had a positive effect on performance if the management team was flexible. Salesperson skills and behaviours are more effective when management practices support their use.

Training and development are one way that management can support their sales teams. The selling environment is always changing, and salespeople need to keep learning about customers, technologies, selling techniques, and more. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) highlight that if companies want to make the transition to selling services, management will need to invest in skills such as customer success management, building long-term relationships,

and value cocreation. Management must provide continual learning opportunities to ensure their salespeople can meet the demands of their jobs.

Performance management is also crucial to managing salespeople. Effective performance management will help align organisational and individual goals. Furthermore, a performance management system that rewards certain behaviours will encourage salespeople to act a particular way. However, when too much pressure is put on salespeople to perform, they may act opportunistically and perform sales behaviours that aren't in the customer's best interest. Yeo and Jan (2022) provide evidence that salespeople who sell-units with high accountability may experience more unethical selling. Companies need to find a balance of holding salespeople accountable for their performance and encouraging customer-oriented behaviour.

Selling has also become more complex. Therefore, the role of a sales manager has expanded to include coordinating the actions of multiple departments. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) state that customer success managers need to coordinate with marketing, operations, IT, and customer service to ensure customers can achieve their outcomes. Sales managers play a significant role in managing the relationship between their sales force and other departments. Technology also plays a role in management support. CRM systems and sales analytics allow sales managers to see everything their salespeople are doing. Not only can managers monitor their employees better than ever, but these tools can provide coaching and development opportunities. Though, these technologies will only be useful if the company encourages learning from one another.

Research has shown that management support is vital to sales performance. However, more research is needed to understand how the various types of management support interact with each other. Another interesting area of research would be to study how management support works in virtual, hybrid, and digitalized sales environments.

2.8 CRM and Customer Success Management

Customer relationship management (CRM) and customer success management have received growing attention in recent sales and marketing scholarship. While CRM relates to customer retention and organisational efforts to maintain relationships with existing customers, customer success management focuses more specifically on ensuring customer satisfaction and helping customers achieve success after purchase. Overall, CRM and Customer Success Management represent a fundamental shift away from transactional selling and towards relationship and value-building activities.

CRM first developed in response to growing competition, customer expectation, and commoditisation. While traditional selling is transactional and focused on closing sales, companies began to recognise the importance of keeping customers as early as the 1990s. Organizations invested significant resources into technologies that would store customer data, track individual customers' journeys, personalise customer interactions, and enhance relationship management efforts (Czinkota et al., 2021). CRM came to be defined as the process of collecting customer intelligence and building relationships with current customers.

Most scholars agree that CRM is instrumental to enhancing organisational performance. Czinkota et al. (2021) posit that CRM systems allow organisations to monitor customer behaviour and preference. Organisations can learn from previous purchasing patterns to identify upselling and cross-selling opportunities, predict customer needs, and tailor services. Functionally, this means that companies must transition from selling products to selling solutions to customers. When customers buy from companies, they do not buy products; they buy solutions to their problem. Customers that feel understood and supported are more likely to return to the business. This logic is not dissimilar to arguments made by relationship marketing scholars. Relationship marketers claim that customer retention, trust, and relationships are central drivers of firm performance.

Companies have experienced mixed-results when adopting CRM. While CRM has proven successful for organisations across contexts, many firms have spent considerable money on CRM technology only to see little to no increase in performance. Czinkota et al. (2021) suggest that CRM implementation fails when too much attention is placed on purchasing technology and not enough attention is placed on organisational change. In other words, companies failed at CRM because they did not consider or enact downstream effects on company structure and culture. Employees were not invested in the new technology, management failed to drive the message of change, and the company was not fully adapted for CRM. This underscores one of the major myths about CRM; technology would fix a company's relationship with customers. Technology can automate and improve CRM efforts, but employees must believe in CRM.

Customer Success Management aims to solve some of the issues companies have experienced with CRM. Rather than focusing on managing customer relationships, businesses are concerned with ensuring customers are successful after the point of purchase. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) describe customer success management as the process of ensuring customers benefit from their purchases. Customer Success Management has grown increasingly popular in recent years, particularly within servitized business models. Many companies today generate recurring revenue through subscriptions, maintenance fees, and long-term contracts. Essentially, companies do not want to just acquire customers – they want customers to continue experiencing value from the firm.

Customer Success Management changes the role of salespeople. Sales professionals are now expected to maintain contact with customers even after sales are closed. According to Kowalkowski et al. (2025), salespeople should view themselves as consultants, trusted advisors, and value facilitators that work with customers to ensure they are experience value from the firm. Selling reps should never leave a customer interaction once a sale is closed. Selling reps must go beyond selling products; they need to ensure customers receive continual value from their purchase. Selling has transformed from making friends and closing sales to guiding customers through their buyer journey. Other scholars have identified intersecting between sales and other functional areas as CRM continues to develop. Graesch, Hensel-Boerner and Henseler (2024) define customer success as the result of collaboration between sales, marketing, and IT. Through the COMPLY framework, they determine how customer value can only be created when functions share information and work together. Boghe et al. (2024) examine the intersection of customer success and sales by analysing how customer success managers aid in selling efforts. Customer success managers help with prospecting, upselling, and cross-selling. They work with customers even after the sale has been made. Customer success management both complements and overlaps with traditional definitions of selling.

New advances in CRM will continue to shape how companies sell. Bharadwaj and Shipley (2020) argue that new CRM technology allows sellers to track digital footprints and better anticipate customer needs. Machine learning and high levels of personalisation allow sellers to provide proactive customer support. If your CRM system knows you always order Friday lunch from your favourite restaurant, it may suggest you place your order ahead of a busy week. Predictive algorithms allow sellers to anticipate need. While customers find this utility useful, Bharadwaj and Shipley warn that relying too heavily on these technologies can make selling feel less human.

2.7 Summary of Reviewed Literature

Selling skills and sales management have been widely studied over the past two decades. The increasing body of research highlights recognition of sales functions as strategically important drivers of organisational performance. There is substantial agreement on the importance of adaptive selling behaviour, emotional intelligence, customer orientation, digital skills, and management support for salesperson performance. However, there remain many gaps and inconsistencies in the literature that span theoretical, methodological, and contextual issues.

Almost all studies confirmed that adaptive selling behaviour was a positive predictor of salesperson performance. Shafiq et al. (2017), Yeo and Jan (20’22), and Chang and Lin (20’24) all found that salespeople who adjusted their selling behaviour to account for customer characteristics and situational factors were more successful than salespeople who maintained consistent selling approaches. These findings support the argument proposed by contingency theory that organisational performance is a function of matching behaviours to contextual demands. However, several studies overlooked the dark side of adaptive selling by assuming it was inherently positive. Yeo and Jan’s (20’22) study provides one exception to this trend by offering evidence that adaptive selling can increase agents’ opportunistic behaviour. While this was investigated by only one article, it exemplifies literature’s myopia toward performance at the expense of ethics.

Emotional intelligence was another common theme among articles reviewed. The literature suggests that emotionally intelligent salespeople are better able to manage customer relationships and capitalise on emotional knowledge to enhance customer engagement (Shafiq et al., 2017; Wisker and Poulis, 2014). However, articles conflict when describing the mechanism through which EI leads to better performance. Some articles imply that the relationship is direct, while Wisker and Poulis (2014) conclude that EI leads to improved performance through its effect on adaptive selling behaviour. The relationship may be reconciled by considering EI as an enabling capability that does not directly impact performance but instead promotes other effective selling behaviours. The inability to differentiate between direct and indirect effects has hindered theory development within this research stream.

A third key theme involves customer orientation. For the most part, articles support past literature that customer-oriented selling positively impacts customer satisfaction, relationship quality, and sales performance (Yeo and Jan, 20’22; Shafiq et al., 2017). Many articles assume that customers and sellers have perfectly aligned interests. In reality, sales agents are often incentivised to maximise short-term sales, even if it comes at the expense of customers’ interests. Current literature does not account for this friction and paints an incomplete picture of customer-oriented selling.

Articles have also started to recognise the importance of digitalisation for selling skills and sales management. Bharadwaj and Shipley (20’20) note that selling in the digital age requires new skills for customer engagement and managing communication. Czinkota et al. (20’21) expands on this idea by highlighting CRM systems and various digital communication channels. Despite this increased awareness, several studies focus exclusively on traditional business settings without considering digitalisation. As a result, current theories may not generalise to digital contexts.

Literature concerning sales management shares many similarities with the articles discussed above. On one hand, articles such as Charoensukmongkol and Pandey (20’23) and Kowalkowski et al. (20’25) identify factors that management can influence to facilitate or hinder selling success. These articles help expand the conversation

surrounding performance by considering factors within the organisation. On the other hand, articles are highly fragmented by only considering individual factors. Although each article provides valuable insights about certain factors (flexibility, training, leadership, customer success), little effort is made to understand how these various systems interact and impact agents simultaneously. Future research would benefit from considering how multiple management components work together to impact selling skills.

Most articles reviewed conducted large-scale quantitative surveys to collect original data. Quantitative studies are certainly valuable for developing an understanding of relationships between variables. However, they do not allow researchers to draw conclusions about causality or long-term changes in behaviour. Research also relies heavily on self-reported performance metrics, which could introduce bias and false conclusions. Sample-wise, empirical articles focus on shoppers from a few high-income countries including the United States, European nations, South Korea, and Malaysia. Contextual diversity needs to be considered by researchers in future studies.

To conclude, existing research provides a wealth of information about selling skills and sales management. Researchers have identified several critical factors that influence sales performance, including adaptive selling behaviour, emotional intelligence, customer orientation, digital capabilities, and supportive management. However, there also exist substantial gaps and inconsistencies in literature. Significant theoretical fragmentation exists across streams of literature, methods remain largely limited to quantitative surveys, and many studies fail to capture the unique contexts of emerging markets. Therefore, future studies should strive to develop more integrative theories, utilise longitudinal methods where possible, and include more diverse samples.

2.8. Gap in Literature

After reviewing some articles, there are some gaps that can be identified in the literature. These gaps can be classified as follows:

Theoretical gaps

The existing body of knowledge on this subject is fragmented. Past studies have investigated how different variables such as adaptive selling, emotional intelligence, customer orientation, or management support impact salesperson performance. However, most of these studies fail to explain how these variables are linked or interact with each other. Therefore, there is a lack of holistic models that explain salesperson performance by including both behavioural, emotional, technological and managerial constructs.

Existing studies have been explained by contingency theory, relationship marketing theory, or social exchange theory. However, in recent years, the landscape for selling has changed with AI-enabled selling, online platforms, customer success management, online communities, etc. Future research needs to include theories that can explain technology-enabled selling and selling with digital customers.

Methodology gaps

Literature review reveals an abundance of quantitative research featuring statistical analysis. However, there is a lack of experimental, longitudinal or qualitative research. Cross-sectional studies are limited by their inability to make inferences on causality or how changes over time impact selling skills or sales management.

Self-reported data on dependent variables such as sales performance are subject to common method bias and social desirability bias. Future research should integrate objective performance metrics as well as customer provided data for a more robust analysis.

Another gap is that the research methodology in existing studies is limited to quantitative surveys. Qualitative and mixed-methods research will help gain deeper insights into how and why selling skills and sales management impact performance.

Contextual gaps

Most studies have been conducted in developed countries such as the US, Canada, Europe, South Korea, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Future studies can look at selling skills and sales management practices in under researched contexts such as emerging markets or developing countries such as those in Africa, Latin America, and Middle East.

Existing research has been done in traditional business settings. Future studies can explore how adaptive selling, emotional intelligence, and customer orientation work in remote business settings.

Practical gaps

Most organisations these days focus on CRM software, customer success management, sales-enablement, and investing in technology. However, studies looking into the intersection of these initiatives and a salesperson's skills are limited. Future research should focus on how organisations can leverage technology by complementing their salespeople's skills.

How adaptive selling can impact customer trust or how organisations can implement ethical selling with a performance-driven sales culture has not been deeply researched. Future studies can investigate this topic.

3.1 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of reviewed literature, this study concludes that salesperson performance is influenced by several selling skills as well as sales management practices. Unlike past research where success was achieved

through mastered skills such as persuasion and product knowledge sales success now depends on other skills such as adaptive selling, emotional intelligence, customer orientation, digital skills and relationship management.
Salesperson performance is also influenced by organisational selling factors such as management support, leadership, sales training, customer success management and organisational infrastructure. The reviewed studies show that salespeople excel when they have flexible management systems, customer-oriented culture and organisational structure. The reviewed literature is scattered, limited and mostly studied in western settings. Most studies focus on individual variables without considering holistic perspectives that may offer insights into how selling skills, sales management and environmental context interact with each other. Technology especially CRM systems, customer success management and AI are rapidly evolving forcing researchers to question previous understanding of selling and sales management.
From the limited body of literature, I believe that organisations that will succeed in future are those with competent and skilled employees who can work hand in hand with technology while being supported by enabling management systems to create value for their customers.

3.2 Recommendations

From the conducted review, I would make the following recommendations:
1. Organizations should invest in developing selling skills such as adaptive selling by training their salespeople to be flexible customer-focused and develop effective problem-solving skills.
2. Organizations should consider emotional intelligence as a selling skill because salespeople with high EI are customer-focused and can build excellent relationships with customers. EI also helps salespeople to read customers allowing them to adapt to customers' needs.
3. Organizations should enhance customer-oriented selling by rewarding salespeople not only for the numbers but also for customer satisfaction, customer retention and creating long term customer relationships.
4. Sales managers should offer more organisational support to their salespeople by coaching, mentoring, training and providing flexible leadership styles that allow salespeople to be innovative when facing customer and market changes.
5. Organizations should invest in CRM systems, customer success, digital skills and utilize technology but not to the extreme. Employees should be trained on how to use the technology and aligned with the organisational processes.
6. Sales managers should develop sales management practices that do not encourage unethical selling just to meet targets. Sales managers should put measures that minimize unethical selling thus building customer trust.
7. Future studies should employ longitudinal studies, qualitative studies and mixed methods

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