



# THE EMERGENCE OF AGILE SALES MANAGEMENT

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International Business  
Bachelor's Thesis  
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**Title of thesis:** The Emergence of Agile Sales Management

**Date:** 8 April 2019

**Degree:** Bachelor of Science in Economics and Business Administration

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### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this study were to identify ways in which sales managers, operating in the B2B context, adapt to and drive changes, as well as to explore emerging sales manager roles, perceived by sales managers themselves.

### **Summary**

The exploratory study interviewed six Finnish sales managers operating in the B2B context, principally engaging in professional selling. The study utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed resulting in 106 pages of data. The data was analyzed using the Gioia methodology.

### **Conclusions**

The study suggests the application of business agility to be able to broaden to include agile sales management, and suggests an agile mindset to be useful for sales managers. Sales managers build adaptiveness, resilience and speed to sales organizations by building a collaborative team-selling culture and by promoting autonomy and self-leadership. The role of a sales manager, at large, seems to have become increasingly people-centric. The study finds emergent roles for sales managers to be a direction-setter, an empowering coach, and a sales success enabler.

**Key words:** sales management, sales leadership, agility, agile, business-to-business, B2B, sales, selling

**Language:** English

**Grade:**

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1. Background**

Effective sales execution is a prerequisite for driving company success (Avlonitis, 2010). However, sales management, for some reason, is an under researched area in the field of business – thus, it is in both academic and professional interest to strengthen our understanding in sales management.

The business-to-business (B2B) sales landscape has experienced meaningful changes in recent years. Cuevas (2018:205), for one, argues that the “contexts in which modern sales forces operate are increasingly characterized by protracted time frames, higher complexity, and relationship-intensity”, requiring different perspective and lens from sales managers (Busch, 2013). In their article “The Ultimately Accountable Job: Leading Today’s Sales Organization”, Colletti and Fiss (2006) state:

[C]hanges in the business environment have made running a sales organization more demanding than it’s ever been. Sales will always be the ultimately accountable job. No other function bears such exposed responsibility for delivering on the numbers. These days, though, that is just the starting point.

Changes in the sales environment have certainly accelerated the need for sales managers to respond and adapt in order to remain competitive (Reid et al., 2017). This thesis will explore how sales managers, operating in the B2B context, have adapted and responded to changes in the sales environment, and how the role of sales managers might have changed, drawing attention to this under researched area.

## **1.2. Research Problem**

The importance of sales managers is widely acknowledged in literature (e.g. Busch, 2013). Similarly, Neil Rackham, in a foreword to “The Sales Acceleration Formula” describes how “boardrooms across the world are looking more closely at sales strategy than ever before” (Roberge, 2015:ix). There are various reasons for the increased interest, such as changes in the market-level dynamics (ibid). The complex, turbulent

sales environment offers a myriad of timely research possibilities in regards to managing and leading today's sales organizations.

The existing sales scholar base is vast, as it should be. This, unfortunately, is not the case for sales management, as it remains an under researched area in sales scholarship. Even so, it is surprising how the scholar base is largely silent in regards to how sales managers adapt and respond to change, as well as how the role of sales managers has changed. Empirical research is thus needed in order to better understand the effect changes in the sales environment have had on sales management.

The growing interest toward sales management in practice, as well as the gaps in research, to conclude, make this thesis timely and relevant not only to academia but to the business community.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

Sales managers as the unit of analysis, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How are sales managers responding to changes in the sales environment?
2. How has the role of a sales manager changed?

### **1.4. Research Objectives**

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify ways in which sales managers adapt to changes and drive change.
2. To explore emerging sales manager roles.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction and Background to Sales and Sales Management studies**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine and comment on existing literature on sales and sales management. This literature review will attempt to identify changes



in the B2B sales environment, and discuss business agility and sales management as a response to the changes.

The extant sales literature is vast, although Storbacka et al. (2009) observe that in general, sales have not received nearly the attention to that of, for example, marketing, logistics and strategy, and therefore remains an under research area. In fact, Harvard Business Review editor Thomas Stewart (2006) in Plouffe et al., (2008:90) comments: “Of all the topics in the field of business, sales has probably gotten the least attention from serious researchers”. A major milestone in the history of sales literature has been the establishment of the *Journal on Personal Selling and Sales Management* (JPSSM) in 1980, as it represents nearly half of the existing sales scholarship base (Williams & Plouffe, 2007). For a comprehensive review of extant sales research, see e.g. Schrock et al. (2016), Flarethy et al. (2018) and Moncrief (2017).

Schrock et al. (2016) exhibit that in scope of the articles published in JPSSM, sales managers and sales management have not, for whatever reason, received comparable attention in research. Further, as displayed by Plank et al., (2018), sales managers and sales management have not been represented any better in other academic journals related to sales. It is puzzling how research continues to neglect the role of sales managers. Sales manager, defined by Plank et al. (2018:78) refers to “any person who has some management role in the sales process in a firm”. In turn, Olson et al., (2001:26) define sales management as “the process of formulating, implementing, and evaluating sales plans and monitoring the performance of the sales force”.

An area of focus in this literature review is how changes in the sales environment have drastically changed the sales discipline (Brown & Jones, 2005; Cuevas, 2018). These changes, according to Jones et al. (2005a) can be categorized into four dimensions, demonstrating the extent of the change: (1) Customers (2) Competitors (3) Ethical/Legal and (4) Technology. Together, changes in these dimensions have contributed to sales scholars even describing sales to be undergoing a revolution (Marshall et al., 2009). In attempt to provide key takeaways from the New Horizons 2018 Consortium, Flarethy et al. (2018) express that despite these changes affecting the sales environment, much sales literature continues to hinge around a short set of

key frameworks and theories. Other scholars agree: Jones et al. (2005a) suggest that these models and assumptions are outdated, and call for revision along with other scholars in the field (e.g. Moncrief, 2017; Storbacka et al., 2009). While revision of sales theory might be required, sales management and sales managers should not be disregarded.

In a recent and exhaustive analysis of empirical research where sales managers are the unit of analysis, Plank et al. (2018:78) highlight that our understanding and knowledge is limited concerning the role and nature of sales managers: “Sales research that has used sales managers as respondents has frequently done so to obtain information about their salespeople rather than to obtain information about themselves or their roles as sales managers”. In fact, although not overlooking the conceptual work done relating to sales management, the article displays that as little as 6.5% of articles in JPSSM are empirical articles asking sales managers about their roles and responsibilities. Thus, one of the key takeaways is that empirical research into sales management practices is very limited but needed in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice as new developments and trends emerge both academically and professionally (Busch, 2013; Brown & Jones, 2005; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010).

Extending the gap between research and our understanding, only few studies have examined the impact changes have had on salespeople. What is even more perplexing is that the impact of these changes on sales managers is hardly even existent in sales literature. Few scholars make up for the exception: Dubinsky and Barry (1982), and finally Reid et al. (2017) roughly 30 years later. When comparing Reid et al.'s (2017) findings to those of Dubinsky and Barry's (1982), it was, as expected, found that changes in the use of sales management practices (SMPs) over time emerged. However, more importantly, the study makes a notation that the use of most SMPs have not changed in the course of roughly 30 years. Given the circumstances of the considerable changes over time in the sales environment, discussed in further detail in the subsequent sections, sales managers seem to practice sales management rather similarly as they did 30 years ago. While the SMPs have been studied to some degree, Marshall and Michaels (2001:16) identify an important research question: “How has the role of sales manager changed in recent years?”.

At large, multiple authors have critically addressed the future of the salesperson (Wilson, 2000; Moncrief, 2017). However, Paesbrugge et al. (2018) argue that for companies, the selling function is becoming increasingly important. In turn, the important role of sales managers is widely recognized in the success of their sales organization and their salespeople (e.g. Busch, 2013; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2008). Therefore, as the sales environment continues to face turbulence, sales managers seem to hold a particularly critical role. Jobs in sales leadership are projected to become more interesting and all the more crucial in today's sales organizations (Cuevas, 2018).

Inspired by the research gaps identified by Marshall and Michaels (2001), Reid et al. (2017) and Plank et al. (2018), this literature review will first focus on the changes and challenges on the B2B sales environment in which sales managers operate in. Next, business agility will be examined and the complex role of a sales manager will be discussed.

## **2.2. Changes in the B2B Sales Environment**

There is a broad recognition that B2B sales are changing drastically (Cuevas, 2018; Moncrief, 2017; Reid et al., 2017). The role of sales is said to be affected by both internal and external elements: “[T]he salesperson’s own organization, market-level dynamics (e.g., competitors), as well as customer-level needs, wants and idiosyncrasies (Plouffe et al., 2013:141).

Further, Cuevas (2018:199) states: “The factors underpinning sales force transformation can be synthesized into a set of three key trends: the nature of customer behavior and evolving expectations of professional buyers, the opportunities (and disruption) offered by new and digital technologies, and the enhanced levels of globalization and competition”. Leigh and Marshall (2001) emphasize the role of rapid reliance on technology in the sales environment, while Busch (2013) also emphasizes the role of increasing competition due to globalization. Earl (2002) adds that even if a company is not pursuing business in the global market-place, they will nevertheless

face competition against companies entering national markets. In addition, Jones et al. (2005) adds the ethical/legal dimension to the equation, while Schenk et al. (2017:1) identify the most notable changes affecting salespeople to be (1) Access to Information (2) More Buyers and Roles (3) The need to create value. As scholars identify multiple dimensions of change, it seems that the cause-and-effect of these changes become harder to grasp.

However, Jones (2005a) compares historical perspectives across four decades and suggests a thought-provoking notation that in some respects, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”. Arguably, the types of challenges imposed on sales managers today will likely be present 20 more years from today (ibid). Nonetheless, change projects challenges that can and will impact the entire sales force. In order to remain competitive during turbulent times, many sales strategies have to, indeed, become truly transformative (Moncrief, 2017).

The key takeaway is that B2B sales have become an increasingly complex and dynamic environment to operate in due to multiple internal and external changes. Three major themes emerging in research are discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections: technological turbulence, the changing buyer-seller dyad, as well as the evolution of the sales process.

### **2.2.1. Technological Turbulence**

The role of technology driving change is emphasized in sales literature (Busch, 2013; Moncrief, 2017; Syam & Sharma, 2018). Technology, whether in the form of CRM systems, social media, or sales force automation, drives change in multiple forms, and can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. In an article “Waiting for a sales renaissance in the fourth industrial revolution”, Syam & Sharma (2018:69) state: “We are undergoing a time of profound transformations powered by digitization, information and communications technology, machine learning, robotics and artificial intelligence”. The impact of technology has been hypothesized to be disruptive and discontinuous for selling (ibid), but it also has the capability to elevate and enhance sales performance in unprecedented ways (Cron, 2017).

Automation and technology have had the greatest impact on “all routine, standard and repeatable activities”, increasing the efficiency of selling functions (Syam & Sharma, 2018:145). Mark Roberge (2015:164) in his book “The Sales Acceleration Formula” emphasizes that “[t]echnology represents an enormous opportunity for sales acceleration”. Sales technology can be used to, for example, accelerate lead sourcing, sales prospecting, lead engagement, as well as automated reporting (ibid). In a similar vein, Jones et al. (2005a:109) positions: “Technology enables salespeople to store, retrieve, and analyze customer data and make specific recommendations that are customized for long-term business solutions”. Understanding customer behavior might be technology and digitalization’s biggest impact on sales (Moncrief, 2017). However, these technological benefits might create burdens for salespeople. Adopting technological systems on an organizational level might be challenging as it requires salespeople to incorporate new technology and procedures into their work without disrupting their primary selling responsibilities (ibid).

Social media alone, due to its pervasive nature, is said to have a revolutionary impact on sales (Marshall et al., 2009). In both business-to-consumer and the business-to-business environments, social media provides selling a completely altered strategy to reach their customers (Moncrief, 2017; Schrock et al., 2016). Further, new social media such as social blogs, networking sites and podcasts are completely changing the way professionals communicate with each other (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010; Borg & Young, 2014). In addition, technology has radically increased transparency, providing buyers with “near perfect information available prior to ever seeing a salesperson” (Moncrief, 2017:277).

Technological advancements are challenging sales leaders to reflect on today’s strategic role of the sales force. As salespeople are using technology increasingly, Reid et al. (2017:981), in a study of sales management practices (SMPs), question why so few sales managers are making “extensive use” of technology in managing and supporting the sales function. Furthermore, a study by (Kuusinen & Väänänen-Vainio-Mattila, 2012) suggests that sales practices are run in a more traditional way than the rest of organization, and therefore even limiting the impacts of other establishments. Although the study only examines a single organization, it still seems that sales managers might not be exploiting the full potential of sales force technology.

The emergent technology, itself, contributes to a changing buyer-seller dyad and the evolving sales process discussed in the subsequent sections.

### **2.2.2. The Changing Buyer-Seller Dyad**

Arguably one of the most drastic external changes affecting the sales environment has been the new role of a buyer, prompting firms to “move toward a more consultative, solution-selling approach” (Paesbrugge et al., 2018:123). On the whole, buyers today demand more value not only from the product or service, but from the relationship (Cuevas, 2018).

Moncrief (2017:272) positions that previously, “[m]ost of sales research examined the sales side of the buyer-seller dyad with the basic assumption that the sales organization was the controlling side of the equation”. Moncrief (2017) states how most sales research has examined the buyer-seller dyad as if the sales organization controlled the equation. In today’s sales environment, however is the customer has increasingly gained control in the relationship (Cron, 2017). As a result, “the sales organization may no longer be the driving force in the buyer/seller dyad” (Moncrief, 2017:272).

Cuevas (2018) notes that new buyer behavior and rising customer requirements have contributed to significant changes in sales organizations. Technology has had a major impact on the buyer-seller dyad (Lacoste, 2018). Not long ago, buyers had to solely rely on the sales organization for solutions and product information (Moncrief, 2017). With buyers currently having more access to information than ever before (Schenk et al., 2017; Paesbrugge et al., 2018), buyers search for new sources of information through the internet “without the benefits of a face-to-face interaction” (Moncrief, 2017:276). Buyers can easily evaluate competitive offerings even feedback from current or previous customers might be available (Cuevas, 2018). Buyers today are therefore positioned to be able to decide exactly “when and how they want to engage with sales professionals” (Schenk et al., 2017:1).

Research by Schenk et al. (2017) shows that there are more buyers and roles involved in a sales process than ever before. Schenk et al. (2017) state that in complex buying situations there are, on average, 5.8 decision-makers involved. In addition, not only are there more buyer roles involved, these decision-making committees often involve individuals from “several levels in the organization, from different departments, and across multiple time zones, each with their own unique agenda” (Schenk et al., 2017:1). As more buyers and roles enter the purchasing function, salespeople and sales managers are facing increasing complexity in the selling environment.

Plouffe et al., (2013:141) citing Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that literature recognizes buying and selling as “symbiotic”. Sloan (2004) and Su and Zang (2008) in Plouffe et al., (2013:141) supports this view: “[T]he trend today is a move away from least-cost transactions and supplier sole-sourcing to long-term buyer-seller relationships with an emphasis on working through conflict, win-win negotiations, and mutual betterment”. However, Moncrief (2017:276) questions the “win-win” philosophy, as the buyer may increasingly be in control of the buyer-seller dyad. The process of creating value for customers is changing dramatically (Cuevas, 2018). Traditionally, “value creation was embedded in a predetermined product or service”, which has ignored the possibility of value co-creation with customers (Cuevas, 2018:199).

As the debate of the future of sales and sales management builds up in B2B, Anderson (1996:30) positions how “high-technology can never fully replace the salesperson’s ability to establish trust with customers, respond to subtle cues, anticipate customer needs, provide personalized service, nurture (sic) ongoing relationships, and create profitable new business strategies in partnership with customers”. While the human element in selling remains, sales are, without a doubt, transforming. For example, Siva Devaki in Meshanda (2018:1) states how sales is increasingly about “building trust and educating”. It is not enough for the sales force to be experts of their products and services - they have to become more knowledgeable about the customer’s business (Cuevas, 2018). With buyers holding a more powerful position today, more is demanded and expected of the seller.

### **2.2.3. The Evolution of the Sales Process**

The evolution of the sales process captures numerous of internal and external changes shaping the B2B sales environment. “Seven steps of selling”, which dates back to the 1920s sales literature, is one of the most widely accepted models demonstrating the B2B sales process (Moncrief et al., 2004). The model views the sales process solely from the perspective of the salesperson, focusing on a relationship existing between *one* salesperson and *one* buyer (Borg & Young, 2014). The traditional seven steps of selling are as follows: (1) Prospecting (2) Preapproach (3) Approach (4) Presentation (5) Overcoming objections (6) Close, and (7) Follow-up (Moncrief et al., 2004:15). Remarkably, for at least 80 years, the steps in the sales process did not face groundbreaking changes, only involving a few alterations (ibid). Further, Borg & Young (2014:544) cite Moncrief and Marshall (2005) stating that the “basic nature of the model remains dominant in sales theory”.

Environmental changes affecting the sales practice have called for a need to continue the conceptualization of the sales process. For example, Moncrief et al., (2004:18) present an “evolved seven steps” process, which, contrary to the traditional seven steps, is not sequential. Moncrief et al., (2004) point out clear transformative factors to the original seven steps, including, but not limited to, the emergence of CRM systems, predetermined buyer needs, changes in prospecting, team-based approach to selling and increased buyer knowledge. Therefore, among other things, the evolved steps include elements of customer retention, solution selling, customer relationship maintenance, adding value and satisfying needs (ibid). More recently, attention has been called to value-based aspects in the sales process (Terho et al., 2012; Viio & Grönroos, 2014; Töytäri et al., 2011). However, despite the weight on relational- and value elements, a single buyer-seller relationship has long been the focus in the conceptualization of the sales process (Borg & Young, 2014).

Changes in the buyer-seller dyad have arguably led to variations in the sales process. Román and Lacobucci (2010:363) note that the single best way to sell does not exist, and that salespeople should be “adaptive enough to select and implement a sales strategy contingent upon the characteristics of the prospective customer and situation”. Viio and Grönroos (2014), in their article “Value-based sales process adaptation in business relationships” research how organizations adapt their sales processes to the buyer, and find that adaptation can be regarded as advantageous for both parties.



Further, when small organizations sell to large buyers, adapting is considered crucial (ibid). In contrast, Keis (2016) highlights the importance of running a sales process according to predetermined policies and procedures, and argues it improving results and efficiency.

Storbacka et al., (2009:901) note how “sales is increasingly about process, rather than a series of separate transactions carried out by a specific function”, and how it is a “shift from an operational to a strategic activity”. In addition, fixed start- and end-points of the sales process have become increasingly blurry (Thaichon, 2018). Further, “linear” sales process conceptualizations building on the seven steps of selling might not be congruent with today’s dynamic and complex B2B sales processes since linear models do not exhibit how today’s selling processes have several simultaneously coexisting dimensions (Åge, 2011). Similarly, current conceptualizations are argued to be underspecified (Plouffe et al., 2013). Further, minimal emphasis is put on empirical analysis, which would help practitioners in optimizing the sales process (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010). Once more, further research is needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

### **2.3. Business Agility**

Changes in the internal and external organizational environments are challenging salespeople’s and sales executives’ “capacity to adapt and perform to meet rising standards” (Jones et al., 2005:106). Chonko and Jones (2005:371), in their article “Need for Speed: Agility Selling”, state: “In turbulent business times, organizations have sought to become more agile”, which can be seen as a response to the afore-discussed changes. Agility, therefore, can be seen as an organizational response to these changes. The concept of agility comprises two main factors according to Dove (1996) and Kidd (1995) in Zhang and Sharifi (2000:496):

- (1) Responding to changes (anticipated or unexpected) in proper ways and due time
- (2) Exploiting changes and taking advantage of changes as opportunities

Merriam-Webster online (2019) defines an agile mindset as “having a quick, resourceful, and adaptable character”. Mathiassen and Pries-Heje (2006:116) break

down the definition: “Quickness is about the speed with which the organization can respond to customer requests, market dynamics, and emerging technology options”, “[r]esources are about the capabilities that are available within the organization including people, technology, process, and knowledge”, and “[a]daptability is about how well the organization responds to changing demands, threats, or opportunities”. Having an agile mindset, therefore, can be argued to be extremely important in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

Business agility, as defined by Sharifi and Zhang (2001) in Mathiassen and Pries-Heje (2006:116), is a “relatively new paradigm painted as a solution for maintaining competitive advantage during times of uncertainty and turbulence in the business environment”. Agility has been studied extensively and especially in systems development and information technology (IT) (ibid), but little emphasis has been given to agility in sales. In their research, Katyama and Bennett (1999:44) discuss agile manufacturing and note that “the principles of agility can equally apply to other functions of a business and to service industries”. Similarly, Chonko and Jones (2005:371) argue that “agility is a concept useful to all sales-people”, and emphasize the importance of salespeople engaging in agility thinking. Under turbulent times, agile salespeople cannot use traditional sales practices as control mechanisms, but rather view them as useful guidance (ibid).

## **2.4. The Complex and Evolving Role of Sales Managers**

Schenk et al. (2017) argues that a sales manager hold the hardest position in sales. It seems that scholars might have yet to grasp the complexity of the role of sales managers in today’s sales environment. The American Marketing Association (AMA) in Madhavaram and McDonald (2010:1080) describes sales management to involve “three interrelating processes: (1) formulation of a strategic sales program (2) implementation of the sales program and (3) evaluation and control of sales force performance”. Interestingly, a study by Deeter-Schmelz et al., (2008) finds that sales representatives regard sales managers in a support role of the sales process, whereas sales managers themselves see their role as a more active and direct one. Schenk et al. (2017), in attempt to demonstrate the complex role of sales managers, identifies

three different areas that are equally important and need to be managed simultaneously: Customers, People, and Business.

Customers must be managed on a strategic level and on a tactical level. At the strategic level, sales managers must ensure that "the account and territory strategies of their organization are implemented on the frontline during customer engagement" (Schenk et al., 2017:6), whereas at the tactical level sales managers spend face-to-face time with customers (ibid).

Sales managers hold an extremely important role in regards to People, since they might be "responsible for the entire lifecycle of the salesperson, from recruiting new hires to developing them to full-productivity" (Schenk et al., 2017:6). Sales managers have to find ways to maximize salespeople's individual performance (Åge, 2014). Smith and Rutigliano's (2003) research found that "having the right sales manager can improve a salesperson's performance by as much as 20 per cent" (Reid et al., 2017:975). The speed of which change occurs in today's sales environment might result in sales managers having to encourage self-leadership within their sales forces (Cuevas, 2018). Self-leadership, as defined by Manz (1986) and Manz and Neck (2004) in Neck and Houghton (2006:271) is a "self-influence process through which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform".

In the area of Business, sales managers' responsibilities include being the liaison between upper management and the sales force (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Weeks et al., 2004). Åge (2014) suggests that sales managers' main concern is to achieve the sales and economical goals of sales, which might include result measurement such as long-term and short-term market share. Sales management policies should, according to Olson et al., (2001) be developed to the direction of enhancing the likelihood of meeting a company's market and financial goals.

Reid et al. (2017:975) group changes affecting sales managers and sales forces into five categories: "customer, technology, financial, sales process and environment". While change threatens stability and continuity (Weeks et al., 2004), it is clear that sales managers have had to respond to these pressures to remain competitive (Reid et al., 2017). Changes in the sales environment require continuous learning and

adapting from sales managers (Moncrief, 2017). Plank et al., (2018:86) highlight a serious gap in our knowledge of sales managers as he points out the need to explore “how sales managers cope with change and how they can drive change”.

Sales managers seem to hold an important role in driving the change that might be needed to respond to changes in the sales environment. Weeks et al., (2004:8) state how “successful change is more likely to occur when leaders, such as sales managers, support change and encourage the support of others, such as salespeople”. However, interestingly, Biggart’s (1977) and again Miles’ (1997) in Weeks et al., (2004:8) cite: “Sales managers have often been identified as the primary locus for resistance to radical change”. Weeks et al. (2004:12) research organizational readiness to change and find that “[t]he more change-ready he or she feels his or her firm is, the higher his or her own performance”.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

The business-to-business sales environment has undergone a myriad of changes and continues to evolve. This literature, among other factors, has identified the following factors:

1. The buyer holds an increasingly powerful position in the buyer-seller dyad with nearly perfect information available to them,
2. Technology has increased sales efficiency but can also have a disruptive nature,
3. The sales process continues to evolve toward an increasingly dynamic process,
4. Under turbulent times, agile behavior and an agile mindset can be useful for salespeople, and
5. Sales managers’ importance is increasing in regards to internal and external changes affecting the sales force.

In addition, the literature has identified gaps in our knowledge regarding sales managers. Two important research questions have emerged from the extant sales literature: How has the role of a sales manager changed (Marshall & Michaels, 2001), and more recently, how sales managers cope with change and how they can drive change (Plank et al., 2018). Considering the important role of sales managers in

regards to change and the speed of which change is occurring, both established in this literature review, empirical research on sales management and sales managers is called for.

### 2.6. Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework identifies the researcher’s assumptions based on the review of literature that, in turn, underlie the foundation for the study.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework on Agile Sales Management (Hirvonen, 2019)

The focus of this study is on changes in the sales environment and their effect on sales management. Changes in the sales environment, therefore, are the natural starting point of inquiry. The review of literature establishes the need for sales managers to respond to these change pressures in order to remain competitive, and establishes the concept of agility to be a useful to all salespeople, leading to the assumption for it to therefore be such to sales managers, although not explicitly defined in research.

Moreover, as established in the literature review, an agile mindset can be defined as “having a quick, resourceful, and adaptable character” (Merriam-Webster online, 2019). The definition can be broken down to mean the speed and the ability of which organizations can respond to changes in the sales environment, as well as the available capabilities within the organization (Mathiassen and Pries-Heje, 2006).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this study is to identify in which ways sales managers are responding to changes occurring in the B2B environment, and to explore emerging sales manager roles, perceived by sales managers themselves. Due to the research objectives being very complex and broad, a qualitative, exploratory approach was selected. Exploratory studies are useful when the area of research might be new or vague, or when important variables may not be defined or known thoroughly (Cooper & Schindler, 2014).

Sales manager as a unit of analysis is an underdeveloped research area. With little understanding existing of the research problem and inadequate theories to ground the study on, qualitative research is particularly useful (Stake, 2010; Johnson, 2015). Further, qualitative research allows for greater researched flexibility, which might be necessary for understanding complex phenomena (Johnson, 2015). Qualitative methodology is very applicable to the sales domain (ibid), and is needed to further bridge the gap between theory and practice (e.g. Moncrief, 2017). Further, the research questions offer a fruitful and timely context for qualitative theoretical development.

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

Interviewees were mainly gathered based on purposive sampling, where participants were chosen for their unique experiences, attitudes and perceptions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014), with the aim to yield insight from rich information sources (Patton, 2002). While most interviewees were chosen by referrals from existing social networks, some were sought out via LinkedIn or through interviewee referrals to other potential interviewees. The focus of the study being changes in the sales environment, all interviewees had to have a strong background in sales management, particularly from operating in the business-to-business context. The interviewees should have responsibility for the sales organization, which contributed to excluding middle sales managers from the study.

The sample consists of six sales professionals from five different companies. Three of the interviewees hold a title “Sales Director”, one “Head of Sale”, one “General Manager” and one “CEO”. All interviewees are Finnish, with a geographical focus being

on the capital region area. It may important to mention how originally, the sample was meant to consist of solely company representatives operating in the field of Information Technology (IT). However, as a potential interviewees emerged from a few other fields, the interviewees were included to the study due to their strong backgrounds in B2B sales management. Table 1 displays the job titles of the interviewees and the industries in which the interviewees operate.

Job Title	Industry
Head of Sales	Information Technology and Services
Sales Director	Information Technology and Services
Sales Director	Information Services
Sales Director	Professional Training and Coaching
General Manager	Mechanical or Industrial Engineering
CEO	Information Technology and Services

**Table 1.** The sample of the study

A semi-structured, in-depth interview approach was employed as the data collection method, which is likely in studies having an exploratory element (Saunders et al., 2016). Semi-structured, in-depth interview approaches are especially advantageous when (1) there are a large number of questions to be answered (2) where the questions are either complex or open ended and (3) where the order and logic of questioning may need to be varied (ibid:394). The research questions were found to fit the aforementioned factors well.

Other benefits of in-depth interviews include the opportunity for interviewees to freely discuss their experiences and attitudes (Johnson, 2015), following the opportunity for the interviewer to probe meanings, adding significance, richness and depth to the data (Saunders et al., 2016). Other benefits include the opportunity for interviewees to lead the discussion into areas not previously considered (ibid). The interview protocol was adjusted when needed, allowing for extraordinary voice to be given to the interviewees (Gioia et al, 2012).

All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the respondents' organizations. Interviews lasted from an hour to two-and-a-half hours. All data was collected in Finnish, and audio-recorded for later transcriptions and analysis.

The interviews allowed to cover themes such as changes the B2B sales environment, their effect on the respondents' companies and on sales managers themselves, as well as the sales organizations, sales processes, important sales management practices, and the role of sales managers. See Appendix 1 for the interview template. The interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences, attitudes as well as perceptions of the emergent themes.

### **3.2. Data Analysis**

In analysing the data, an inductive approach was employed with an aim to search for and identify meanings in data and to understand the social context and perceptions of interviewees (Saunders et al., 2016). The data resulted in 106 pages of Finnish, transcribed data. All transcribed data was read again before the analysis.

The Gioia methodology was chosen as the approach to bring "qualitative rigor to the conduct and presentation of inductive research" (Gioia et al., 2012:15). A myriad of interesting statements, excerpts and terms were collected from the data. Early in the analysis, 1st-order concepts allowed to emerge from the data, resulting in a myriad of categories. Further, similarities and differences among these categories were carefully sought after amongst the many categories, eventually reducing the number. Labels and other descriptors were given to these 2nd-order themes. The emergent themes were further distilled to "aggregate dimensions" (ibid:20).

The data was analyzed in Finnish with an aim to assure that the intended meaning was preserved throughout the entire analysis. Careful and thoughtful translation took place after identifying the 2nd-order concepts.

### **3.3. Limitations of Methodology**

The most obvious limitation of the study is that it limits to a handful of industries, with research participants mostly engaging in professional selling. It might therefore not be adequate to apply findings across other contexts.



Second, interviewees taking part in the study all have a different span of control in their sales organizations. Although the extant empirical research is largely silent regarding the span of control of sales managers, it can be assumed to have an effect on the interviewees' role perceptions.

Lastly, the relatively small sample size itself can be regarded as a limitation in the study. However, the in-depth interviews resulted in a large amount of rich, insightful data. Similar to qualitative research in general: "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected ... than with sample size" (Patton, 2002:245).

#### **4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study is to examine how sales managers are responding to and driving changes in the sales environment, and to explore emergent roles of sales managers, perceived by sales managers themselves.

The empirical data revealed how sales managers operate in very dissimilar organizational structures, inevitably shaping the role and position of sales managers. It is important to note that not all interviewees perceive the role of sales managers to have changed similarly. A few of the interviewees, for example, have not witnessed an explicit change in the role of sales managers in a given five-year timeframe (see Appendix 1 for the interview template). In addition, current business strategies, among other aspects, seem to influence the behavior and approaches taken by sales managers.

The findings and analyses are presented by dominant themes emerging from the data. Both research questions are addressed, to some extent, in all subsequent sections due to their vague and complex nature.

##### **4.1. Sales manager setting direction and driving change**

The sales environment is undergoing changes at an accelerating pace, as illustrated by a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company:

*Today's world is not 'Complicated', today's world is 'Complex'. A complex world is such where the cause and affect can no longer be modeled. Everything has an effect on everything and everything changes constantly, the pace of change accelerates continuously.*

While all interviewees discussed changes affecting the sales environment and sales management at length, some interviewees emphasized how sales managers have always had to adapt and respond to changing in business conditions. Similarly, Jones et al., (2005a) find how dynamism in the sales environment might occur even to a significant extent along dimensions that remain constant over time. Nevertheless, all interviewees emphasized the importance of sales managers having their finger on the pulse. As a CEO of an IT and Services company positioned it:

*To some extent, it's certainly an illusion that everything in the world is changing. The majority of things don't change much after all, but the way things are discussed and how things are done changes and iterates at a very high pace even at this moment. Therefore, it is important to stay alert and improve oneself, and to not get stuck in a rut with what worked or didn't work a long time ago. It's important to know and remember how things were done before and why it works and why not, but it's even more important to be aware about what is happening around us now and what will happen tomorrow.*

The data revealed that interviewees experience change in slightly different ways and dimensions, which can be seen to contribute to the continuous changes on the sales profession. Despite how sales managers regard change occurring over time, staying alert and adapting to what is happening in sales and the market was emphasized in all interviews. Cuevas (2018:204), for one, finds "Openness to change and adaptability" to be competency requirements of the future managerial role in sales. Along with having to have a finger on the pulse, many interviewees identified the role of today's sales manager to be a direction setter, as a Sales Director of an IT and Services company expressed:

*Today's salespeople should be lead in a way that, I would put it in a way that, the [sales manager] has to strongly be a direction setter. So, they have to have vision and faith in a way that involves the people in what they believe in and where they need to be directed.*

Sales managers, therefore, have to be aware of changes around them, be visionary, and set direction. In a similar vein, multiple interviewees emphasized sales managers to hold an important role in regards to change management.

*...leadership is to understand the people in a way that when you introduce something new, why not something old too, you have to understand how the people react. That you know the people so well that you understand their emotional reactions, allowing you to evaluate the ambition level of what changes are realistically possible to be driven in the organization. So, the role of a sales manager, if nothing changes, do we need leaders [...]? In sales leadership, as well as all leadership, the most important task is to drive change. (Sales Director, Professional Training and Coaching company)*

Several interviewees identified old ways of working to pose functional challenges to their organizations. Therefore, sales managers hold an important role in driving change in their sales organizations. The interviewees emphasized the difficulty of managing and leading change to a great extent. Managing and leading change, no matter how big or small, is demanding and requires repeatability, consistency, and leading by example, as a Sales Director of an Information Services company shows:

*[Change] isn't something that happens just like that [...]. It is repetition, continuous repetition, training people on how we should go about this in the future. And it also requires, well, the organization also reacts with resistance. So, this isn't just you saying "I believe this is the best possible way", you also have to demonstrate it, showing that this is the correct way.*

Change management is ineffective without strong leadership (Hocine & Zhang, 2015). The role of sales managers seems to increasingly revolve around setting direction and managing change in order to successfully respond and adapt to change pressures. Altogether, the ability of creating and responding to change can be interpreted to align

with sales managers having an agile mindset, discussed further in the subsequent section.

## **4.2. Agile Sales Management**

*What is important here is to build adaptiveness, since no one knows what will happen in the world. What you have to do strategically - you must build resilience and adaptiveness to your organization, so that it endures change and is able to react, adapt [...] to change. (Head of Sales, IT and Services company)*

The study suggests that sales, in principle, is agile. Further, an agile mindset was interpreted to be a beneficial concept to today's sales managers, and can be seen as a response to operate in the changing in sales environment. The study shows how sales managers build adaptiveness and speed to their organizations through promoting transparency, salespeople autonomy and self-leadership as well as collaborative team-selling. A Head of Sales of an IT and Services company pointed out: *"Adaptiveness is more important than speed, and [speed] follows [adaptiveness]"*.

### **4.2.1. Autonomy and Self-Leadership Promotion**

Interview data displayed sales managers supporting a relatively strong degree of autonomy in their managerial style. Some interviewees discussed a more disciplined autonomy approach, where individual minimum activity standards have to be met. According to Jones et al. (2005b), in a turbulent and complex business environment, sales teams continue to need organizational rules and procedures, but must have some degree of autonomy. Correspondingly, promoting and developing salespeople's self-leadership skills also revealed to be important, as explained by a CEO of an IT and Services company:

*The most important thing, of course, are the self-leadership skills of salespeople. They can always be developed and have to be developed. The world is simply too fast for managers to always tell people "you have to do this and you have to do that".*

Similarly, a Sales Director of an IT and Services company expressed how a sales manager can easily become a bottleneck without providing salespeople with some

degree of autonomy. Even when supporting autonomy and promoting self-leadership, sales managers have to ensure the feeling of inclusion, as a General Manager of a Mechanical or Industrial engineering company clarified:

*No one should be left to deal with things alone. [A sales manager] has to always be on the radar in a way that is not micro managing, but simply ensuring that the salesperson doesn't feel alone.*

#### **4.2.2. Building a Collaborative Team Selling Culture**

Interviewees, to a very large degree, identified their sales organizations to be focused on collaborative team selling. Team selling is defined to be the “process of sharing and leveraging knowledge within your company with everyone who touches the customer” (Gardner, 2014:1). Promoting team selling and building a culture of cooperation and collaboration seems essential for sales managers in today's sales environment, as a Sales Director of an Information Services company shows:

*The biggest thing in sales might be to admit that as a sales manager, you're not the best at everything. Really, the sales people and the sales manager together form the winning team. So, I don't think I'm better than my salespeople at everything, I would rather hope for all of us to be the best at something. That's what forms the best possible combination.*

Further, a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company exemplified his role as a sales manager in an autonomous team selling focused sales organization:

*[Being a sales manager], let me slightly exaggerate, means that I have not booked a single sales management meeting for my salespeople [...] so, the teams have found their own ways to lead themselves, to lead sales in a way that is relevant for them, and they invite me. They invite me, like, “hey [name], can you and a few others come help us?” Then I go there and we work together, and then I continuously pass that information along to other teams.*

Some interviewees identified their sales teams to be rather self-organizing and autonomous, stressing the importance of mutual trust between sales managers and

salespeople. From the interview data, it emerged that in many of the interviewees' organizations, sales teams are organized more based on salespeople's skills rather than specific roles or titles, employing all possible organizational resources.

Sales managers seem to be extremely needed even, or especially, in an increasingly transparent, autonomous, team-selling approached sales organizations. Sales managers must coach and empower salespeople, and provide an environment that allows salespeople to succeed.

### **4.3. Placing People at the Center**

All interviewees indicated that leadership has either become an increasingly important part of sales management, or has always been important. A CEO of an IT and Services company shows:

*I believe a good manager has to have strong leadership skills and strong management skills. My own experience and, well, my evaluation is that a strong manager without leadership skills doesn't accomplish a whole lot. A strong leader without management skills, on the other hand, causes damage.*

The degree of how much focus was given on sales leadership varied between interviews, but in general, changes in the sales environment seem to have changed the role of sales managers to be ever more people-centric, and seems to continue to evolve to that direction. Not only does change occur in the external sales environment, some interviewees discussed changes in salespeople beliefs and values.

*Nowadays, people demand more from work [...]. The biggest challenge [for sales management] is having to be able to create a work environment where the people want to come to every day, and that they feel that their work is meaningful, which is very, very highlighted. How this is fulfilled might be the biggest [challenge] (Sales Director, IT and Services company).*

Salespeople seem to be increasingly purpose-driven, posing challenges for today's sales managers. Some interviewees acknowledged employee retention as one of their challenges and an important aspect of their role. In addition, an emergent theme was

the importance of enhancing the feeling of psychological safety among their salespeople, as a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company demonstrated:

*When we enter a sales meeting, we try to create a complete feeling of safety and trust [for salespeople]. That they don't have to be scared. We know that for regular people, a sales process, it might intimidate them. So, we create an environment as safe and trusting as possible, in all ways. It is created for everyone.*

A reference was made to a study by Google, which examined successful teams and indicates that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical to team success (Duhigg, 2016). Psychological safety is found to be linked to sales team creativity and performance (Jiang et al., 2016), making it critical for sales managers to foster and enhance the feeling among salespeople in their management approaches. A CEO of an IT and Services company raised an important aspect regarding the sales profession:

*An especially important task for sales managers is, well, no other profession exists where a person gets rejected as much as compared to sales. And well, if the salesperson isn't completely emotionally restricted, he or she will need quite a lot of support in those situations. And then, on the other hand, when we enter the other end of the spectrum, when everything seems to succeed, the salesperson needs guidance on what to focus on.*

Placing people and humanity at the center, interview data revealed that sales managers identify their roles to be empowering sales coaches and enablers for sales success.

#### **4.3.1. Sales Manager as an Empowering Coach**

The study showed that sales managers regard an important part of their role to be an empowering coach. Sales managers work actively to empower their sales teams:

*I have a principle where, every time you enter a room, you should be able to enter in a way where everyone's performance in the room grows during your presence. To do whatever you possibly can in order for the people to, like, that their performance*

*improves during that time, and that the impact would be left in that room when you leave (Head of Sales, IT and Services company).*

*Instead of pushing your team down, it's about having the abilities to lift the people up. Especially when things might not go as well, the sales manager should cast faith in the team, like, "hey, we're capable of so much". You know, to inspire, make people smile and perform (General Manager, Mechanical or Industrial Engineering company).*

In addition to empowering teams, interviewees emphasized the importance to devote enough one-to-one time with their salespeople. Sales managers must understand their salespeople's individual ambitions and personalities better than ever. A few interviewees even highlighted spending time to craft personal growth paths for each of their salespeople's careers. A CEO of an IT and Services company noted how in the end, the success of a sales manager might be measured by how many averagely performing salespeople is he or she able to coach and empower to become top sales performers. Sales managers' role as a coach was certainly not overlooked by research participants. A Sales Director of an Information and Services company discussed coaching:

*Sales management has developed increasingly toward creating a coaching culture [...]. Coaching doesn't directly mean "this is what I'm saying, do this". It's more about introducing ideas where the person would understand how they might be able to perform better [...]. So, [sales managers] must have the capabilities to see what things each individual should improve on.*

Interestingly, differing stances in regards to activity monitoring and measuring emerged. For one, a Sales Director of an IT and Services company stated having given up monitoring and measuring salespeople activities on an individual level, and rather focusing on measuring the entire business unit performance. On the other hand, a CEO of an IT and Services company reflected:

*A dimension I don't witness enough yet, but what I believe we'll witness a lot more [in sales management], is leading sales by numbers. How to put it, sales is one of the easiest things in the world to measure [...] and it is pretty easy to lead by numbers. Salespeople, instead, are very hard to lead by numbers. The majority, as silly as it*



*seems, become distressed about numbers [...]. In order for [leading by numbers] to happen, it requires a change of attitudes, where monitors and numbers, from both sales managers and salespeople perspectives, should not be viewed as tools for micro managing or controlling. Instead, they should be viewed as tools for better understanding and decision-making.*

The findings might therefore also suggest sales coaching to be increasingly focused on metrics in the future. While the area of measuring and monitoring is inevitably important regarding the changing role of sales managers, a full discussion is beyond the scope of this study. The rise of technology and automation, in general, seems to have altered the role of a sales manager, as corroborated by a General Manager of a Mechanical or Industrial Engineering company:

*...one-to-one moments between a sales manager and salespeople, instead of examining the past, like “your goal is here, you are here”, [...] that information should be available automatically through technology. Then, I should focus more on how I, as a sales manager, can help you.*

#### **4.3.2. Sales Manager as a Sales Success Enabler**

A large number of interviewees find the role of sales managers to be a supporter and an enabler and for their salespeople's success. While the role can imply anything related to sales success, it holds an important meaning. At large, the role can be interpreted as put by a Sales Director of an Information Services company:

*I believe the primary task for sales managers is to be, like, “sales support” [...]. I'd say that we sales managers hold a fairly simple role, where we just have to help and enable our salespeople to sell more.*

Although the viewpoint of how sales managers view leadership was not supported by all interviewees, a very interesting point emerged from a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company, supporting the role of a sales success enabler:

*The thought here is that you don't have to try to please the manager or to accomplish the goals set by the manager, because no, that's not why we hired you, we hired you*

*to create value and to do the things you're interested in and inspired by. And then the manager, if we think, "manager", which is the wrong word in today's world, but the, some sort of a manager, maybe I'd use the word leader, the job of the leader is to enable your value creation.*

It may be possible to interpret the interview data to state that the interviewees do not regard themselves as holding a role superior to their salespeople. Sales enablement essentially means "anything that 'enables' salespeople to win more sales", which can mean a myriad of things, from introducing new technology to a better sales strategy (Boyette, 2016:1). Essentially, the interviewees regarded the role of an enabler as important philosophy for sales managers, rather than a function. Sales managers' role can be seen as to identify and provide whatever it may require for salespeople to sell more, and to remove all things preventing salespeople from selling more (ibid).

Enabling salespeople value creation, interviewees agreed how sales managers, same as their salespeople, must engage in meaningful dialogue with customers. However, some sales managers identify that rather than holding individual accounts, they would hope to engage with customers as a support for their salespeople. A CEO of an IT and Services company stated:

*...it is important for salespeople to know that they are supported, but it has to be strictly about actually supporting the salespeople instead of doing their job. And then, well, in building a relationship with a customer of course, it is a central role for all managers to meet with customers when their presence might assure them of their importance.*

Another way to support salespeople through customer engagement, mentioned by the majority of interviewees, is opening doors to their salespeople.

#### **4.4. Sales Driven Organizations**

The interview data revealed an interesting theme highlighting how the role of sales managers is changing in organizations. All interviewees, naturally, stressed the importance of sales in organizations. A pattern that emerged from several interviews, however, is that today, selling in organizations occurs increasingly beyond sales organizations. When asking a Sales Director from a Professional Training and

Coaching company to describe the company's sales organization, the answer begun as follows: "In general, let me begin by saying that [in the organization], everyone sells". Although the extent of how much selling takes place beyond sales organizations varies between companies, a CEO of an IT and Service company brought up an observation:

*A very important aspect, [...] is that in a successful organization, selling is performed by a whole lot of others than just salespeople. That type of selling is sustainably profitable when it is somewhat consistent with the selling performed by salespeople. And, well, it might be an important, and most likely a growing aspect of sales management, how to lead the selling happening outside the sales organization.*

As organizations seem to become increasingly more sales driven, sales managers naturally hold an ever more important role. In the future, sales managers might increasingly have to find effective ways to lead, not only their sales teams, but the entire organization's sales efforts. Further, a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company established:

*I told my boss [...] that I would come [work for the company] with the mentality that we'd build a winning sales culture, which means that the entire organization must be present in sales. The more people have a sales mindset and feels like they're present in sales, the better. Of course there are key people that sell more, but the mindset has to be that "everyone sells".*

In the future, sales managers might even hold a role in regards to the entire company culture. Sales managers have a massive effect on organizations' sales cultures. The "everyone sells" mindset might present another impetus for change in the role of sales managers, since a company's sales culture might have a considerable and increasing effect on the entire company culture. The complexity and importance of the role of sales managers can therefore only be expected to rise.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

This study set out to address the following research objectives:

1. To identify ways in which sales managers adapt to changes and drive change.
2. To explore emerging sales manager roles.

The existing scholar base regarding the turbulent sales environment are largely echoed by the findings of this empirical study. This study reinforces how sales managers operate in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment, although highlighting the fact how there is nothing new about change. In fact, although change is arguably happening at an accelerating speed, the changing sales environment seems to be a standard for sales managers. This study highlights, that driving change is certainly not effortless for sales managers, nor is that the case for any managers. In that sense, sales managers responding to change with speed is not necessarily supported in this study. The goal in today's sales environment, however, might not solely be the ability to respond to change, but rather to navigate flux – that is, continual change.

The empirical study supports agility to be a useful concept to salespeople (Chonko & Jones, 2005), and further elaborates it being useful to sales managers. The findings, although not necessarily generalizable, suggest the application of business agility to be able to broaden to include agile sales management. While the extant literature has not attached agility to sales management explicitly, the suggestion is made on several findings. Principally, sales managers seem to build adaptiveness, resourcefulness and speed (Mathiassen & Pries-Heje, 2006:116) in sales organizations by for example promoting a culture of collaborative team-selling, empowerment, autonomy and self-leadership. The question over the extent of which sales managers display agile characteristics, however, is open to debate. The aforementioned findings sheds light to the ways of which sales managers might adapt and respond to changes.

Some contributors to the Agile Manifesto “support the distribution of the agile mindset into new fields of application” (Hohl et al., 2018:22). Having said that, it has also been criticized due to the commercialization of selling “agile” and a loss of the fundamental ideas attached to the concept (ibid). However, Chonko and Jones (2005:38) highlights: “A fascinating aspect of agility is that its meaning is ever-changing. Agility is about responding to the unexpected with speed”.

With the aim to explore emerging sales manager roles, it is noteworthy that the findings cannot necessarily be concluded to an explicit change in a role of sales manager perceived similarly by all interviewees. It is evident that the interviewees in this study operate in significantly different organization structures and cultures, contributing to the participants experiencing change differently. In some organizations, certain roles presented in the findings seem to have been a standard for a longer time frame, whereas for others, the role of sales managers has changed fundamentally on an organizational level.

Even so, the findings of this study reinforces sales managers having taken on an increasingly people-centric role, and emphasizes and reinforces the acknowledged importance of sales leadership today's sales environment (Jaramillo et al., 2009). Plank et al., (2018) find sales leadership, with 39 empirical studies, to be the largest category in their analysis of empirical studies with sales managers as a unit of analysis. However, it is established that literature is silent regarding how sales managers view leadership (ibid), which this study sheds light to. The findings reinforce, for one, that an aspect of a sales manager's role to be an empowering coach (see Good, 1993). Similarly, a role of a sales manager as an enabler for sales success, largely corresponds to servant-leadership (see Jeramillo et al., 2009).

Interestingly, Cravens, (1995) in his study on the changing role of a French salesperson in 1995, finds changes in the role of sales managers to be surprisingly similar as this empirical study nearly 25 years after. Cravens finds managerial factors such as coaching compared to commanding, fostering organizational change, as well as removing performance hurdles for sales people to change the role of sales managers, which are largely echoed by this study. The similarities can be explained by a number of factors. For example, again, sales managers operate in a myriad of differing organizational structures and cultures, and an established organization culture is difficult to change (Jones et al., 2005b). For some, more hierarchical organizations, a paradigm shift in management might not even be realistic. In addition, the similarities, although comparable only very superficially, might suggest at least some dimensions of change do remain consistent over time (Jones et al., 2005).

The study also suggests that the importance and complexity of sales managers in organizations might increase in the future, as organizations seem to become increasingly sales driven. This study shows how selling is performed increasingly beyond sales organizations. Sales management literature is largely silent regarding how sales managers might lead sales efforts occurring beyond sales organizations, which this study suggests might be a growing area of interest in both sales management practice and literature. In addition, this study suggests that sales managers might have an increasingly important role on the entire organizational culture, which also is not explicitly addressed in the existing scholar base.

It is important to note how the study was subject to a number of translation dilemmas. Most evidently, the Finnish language, in which the interviews were conducted, lacks separate terms for “sales management” and “sales leadership”. The translation, however, required the researcher to stop and think about meaning in more depth. While the nature of research cannot be conclusive, nor was it aimed to be, the emergent empirical findings contribute to our understanding on the set research objectives. In addition, the emergent themes in this study, although discussed in sales literature, have arguably not been studied enough in sales management. This study draws further attention to these areas. Due to its exploratory nature, this study might raise more questions than asks, reinforcing the need for more empirical studies to further narrow down the gaps in our understanding in sales management.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1. Main Findings**

The main findings of this thesis include the emergence of agile sales management, and suggests an agile mindset agility – defined as having “quick resourceful, and adaptable character” (Merriam-Webster online, 2019) - to be a useful mindset for sales managers.

The findings of this thesis reinforce that changes in the sales environment require sales managers to continuously have their finger on the pulse. The goal in today’s sales environment seems to not simply be the ability to respond to change, but rather to navigate flux – continual change. The study suggests that sales managers build

adaptiveness, resilience and speed to their organizations by building a collaborative team-selling culture and by promoting autonomy and self-leadership among salespeople.

The findings suggest the role of sales managers having changed to be increasingly people-centric. In addition, this study suggests sales managers to hold an increasingly important role in driving change. This study, exploring emergent sales manager role perceptions, suggests sales managers' roles to include to be a direction setter, an empowering coach, and sales success enabler.

In addition to managing their salespeople, the findings suggests that in the future, sales managers might be looked for to lead sales efforts taking place beyond sales organizations. Organizations might become increasingly sales driven, as this study suggests, contributes to sales managers holding a more important role in regard to the entire organization culture.

The findings of this study conclude, as put together by a Head of Sales of an IT and Services company participating in the study: "*The importance of leadership grows in a complex world*".

## **6.2. Implications for International Business**

Although the empirical study is limited to Finnish interviewees, the findings can be somewhat adequately applied to an international context. The interest in the role of sales management and leadership is certainly not restrained to the Finnish business market, making the inquiry relevant for international business.

Global competition is one of the changes sales management has to adapt to. Even if a company decides to focus solely on the national market, their global competition certainly has not decided so. The way sales managers perceive change in the sales environment might vary depending on the country or operation. In addition, cultural differences between sales managers as well as salespeople undoubtedly exist, arguably affecting the sales management approaches used.

As discussed, organizational structures, among other things, might have considerable effect on, for example, the role perceptions of sales managers. Finnish companies generally have flat organizational structures, whereas organizations operating in more hierarchical, bureaucratic structures might indicate less managerial willingness to, for example, delegate authority.

That being said, with the importance of sales managers widely recognized, any inquiry to how sales managers might respond to changes and sales manager role perceptions can provide useful and practical information across national borders for a better understanding of sales management in today's turbulent business environment.

### **6.3. Managerial Implications**

While sales management approaches and roles certainly are certainly not "one size fits all", there are several managerial implications that can be drawn from this study.

For one, the study finds sales managers to perceive their role to have changed to increasingly people-centric. A role of a sales success enabler was emphasized in this study, which can be seen to hold valuable meaning. This study suggests how sales managers should view the role to be a guiding principle. Sales enablement is primarily a useful attitude for sales managers, but it may be useful to accentuate that as a sales manager, one can be deployed as a sales enablement resource. This might lead to a discovery of unexpected ways in which a sales managers can enable salespeople to sell more.

The study elaborates an agile mindset to be beneficial to sales managers. In today's B2B sales environment, sales managers' efforts to build adaptiveness to sales organizations, may be of utmost importance. Sales managers, as this study suggests, ought to build a culture of collaboration and team-selling where applicable, as well as promote autonomy and self-leadership. Building mutual trust and accountability can be essential, although it may occasionally be difficult for sales managers to stand back and not lead salespeople from the front.



The study reinforces the importance of coaching and the aim to maximize individual sales person performance. Sales managers should manage their time carefully in order to ensure enough time is left for coaching. This study suggests it being beneficial for sales managers to reflect on how they might be able to lead and support selling efforts occurring beyond the sales organization. In addition, it may be important for sales managers to recognize the effect that their managerial approach might have on the entire organization's culture. Sales managers should be mindful of this fact in a work environment where people are increasingly purpose-driven.

It is to be hoped that the data excerpts, findings and other insights presented in this study, offer sales managers food for thought and perhaps even fresh perspectives to reflect on.

#### **6.4. Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has opened a number of suggestions for future research based on the findings, limitations and implications for international business.

The exploratory nature of this study makes it a good starting point for testing some of the findings presented in this study in a larger sample. As the sample of this study limited to Finnish respondents, and limited to few industries, a similar study could be replicated in other countries and industries, in order to help evaluate the extent of which the findings could be applied across different nationalities and industries. In addition, ethnographic research would provide valuable insight to our understanding of the role of sales managers. Ethnographic approaches could be adopted to further examine sales managers' role in, for example, an autonomous, team-selling culture.

This study highlights a myriad of possible new avenues that could be examined in future studies. For one, the study could be replicated with the objective to explore whether organizational structures have a considerable effect on how sales managers perceive their roles. Similarly, research could be conducted to compare the emergent roles perceived by of sales managers to the roles perceived and positioned by their managers.

The empirical data presented a debate regarding sales person activity and performance monitoring and measuring, which could be explored in a larger sample to further understand sales managers' views. In addition, the study suggests an increasing amount of selling efforts beyond the sales organization. It could be examined how the increase affects the role of sales managers, as well as how sales managers might lead these selling efforts.

Lastly, more empirical research is suggested to be able to conclude the application of business agility to be able to broaden to include agile sales management.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Interview template

1. How long have you worked in the industry?
2. Do you have experience from any other industries?
3. Can you describe your background in sales in [company]?
4. Can you describe your sales organization?
  - 4.1. "Team" or "individual" effort?
5. Can you describe your sales process?
6. From your point of view, can you describe how the sales environment has changes during the recent years?
  - 6.1. What have been the biggest functional challenges for [company]?
  - 6.2. How have you been able to respond to these changes?
7. How have these changes affected sales management at [company]?
8. Sales today could be described as fast-paced. How do you keep up with this speed?
9. What sales management practices do you regard especially important in today's sales environment? Why?
10. How big of a role does industry knowledge play in sales managers?
11. Imagine trying to find a new sales manager to [company]. What are you looking for in this person?
  - 11.1. How about a sales person, what skills are required from a salespeople today?
12. In general, can you describe the biggest challenges for sales managers?
13. In general, can you describe the role of a sales managers today?
  - 13.1. What would you have answered if I had asked this five years ago?
  - 13.2. Do you believe your answer would be different, if I would ask this five years from now?
14. In addition, may I ask if there is anything "scary" to you in these changes?
15. What else would you like to share? What have we not focused on?

