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GAMECHANGER IN SALES COMPETITION: HOW AI IS REWRITING THE RULES IN B2B COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

Business-to-business (B2B) sales are facing significant challenges that are characterized by the increasing complexity of markets, increasing competition and the rapid development of digital technologies. Artificial intelligence (AI) offers promising solutions by automating up to 40% of sales activities, enabling efficiency gains. At the same time, AI-powered systems use predictive analytics to accurately predict customer behavior and sales opportunities, allowing companies to increase competitiveness. This study sheds light on the requirements and expectations of sales staff for AI-based assistance systems. A quantitative survey identified key challenges such as inefficient data maintenance, inadequate assessment of sales opportunities and difficulties in identifying decision-makers. In addition, the results show that sales reps particularly appreciate features such as automating repetitive tasks, risk identification, and personalized recommendations for action. The study highlights that AI is a valuable tool for increasing efficiency, but cannot replace human skills in complex interactions. Future research should focus on developing hybrid models that promote optimal collaboration between humans and machines. This balance is crucial to ensure efficiency, customer satisfaction and innovation in B2B sales in the long term.

Keywords: B2B sales, artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, digitalization, sales competition.

INTRODUCTION

B2B sales are facing constant challenges resulting from the growing complexity of markets, increasing competition and the rapid development of digital technologies. Sales reps are exposed to an enormous flood of information, while at the same time customer expectations for an individualized and proactive approach are increasing. These developments require new approaches to remain competitive in a dynamic environment.

AI has proven to be a key enabler in this context, which can profoundly change the entire sales process. While traditional methods often require manual processes, AI enables the automation of up to 40% of sales activities, which greatly increases efficiency and allows sales reps to focus on more strategically valuable tasks (Hunter, 2019). In addition, AI-powered systems use predictive analytics to accurately predict customer behavior and sales opportunities, giving companies a competitive advantage by allowing them to respond more quickly to market changes (Paschen et al., 2020).

Another important aspect is the ability of AI to provide personalized recommendations for action and thus develop tailor-made solutions for individual customer needs. This personalized approach, based on emotional intelligence and data analysis (Davenport et al., 2020), could significantly increase customer satisfaction and retention, similar to what is already being used successfully in digital marketing.

Through a survey of B2B sales professionals, practical insights are collected into the expectations, wishes and potential challenges associated with the introduction of such systems. The results of this study are not only intended to provide an overview of the requirements of sales experts for a solution, but also to show how companies can ensure their long-term competitiveness by using AI assistants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI is a comprehensive field of research that aims to develop systems that exhibit human-like cognitive abilities. In the scientific discussion, AI is divided into three main stages: Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and Artificial Superintelligence (ASI). ANI, also known as "weak AI," refers to specialized systems designed to perform narrowly defined tasks. Examples include voice assistants such as Siri, which are able to answer simple queries, or image recognition systems, which can identify specific objects in visual data. This form of AI is limited in its capabilities and cannot handle tasks outside of its predefined range (Kruse, 2024). In contrast, AGI describes a hypothetical stage where AI systems gain human-like, broad understanding and are able to perform intellectual tasks in different domains independently. AGI would allow machines to learn, understand and interact at a level that corresponds to human thinking. Despite intensive research and advances in AI development, there are currently no AGI systems and the realization of this technology poses significant technical and ethical challenges (Rainsberger 2021; Salehi & Burgueño, 2018). The further stage, ASI, refers to a hypothetical form of AI that would surpass all cognitive abilities of humans. An ASI system could not only solve tasks in various areas with superhuman precision and speed, but also generate new insights that are inaccessible to humans. However, the development of such systems carries immense risks and raises questions about control and the potential impact on society. Therefore, there is a lot of discussion in the scientific community about how to ensure the responsible and safe development of such technologies (Hoeren & Pinelli 2022).

In sales, ANI systems are currently mainly used to take over repetitive tasks such as data entry, customer management and the automation of communication processes. The introduction of such systems has already led to significant efficiencies by relieving sales reps of time-consuming, administrative tasks and allowing them to focus on more strategic and value-adding activities. This includes, for example, the analysis of customer needs and the individual adaptation of sales strategies. While ANI systems have proven their usefulness in specific application areas, they reach their limits when it comes to capturing complex contexts or conducting demanding negotiation processes (Rainsberger 2021).

However, the vision of AGI systems in sales, which would be able to comprehensively respond to customer needs and handle complex interactions autonomously, remains a long way off. (Renner 2025) Such a system could revolutionize sales by supporting not only operational but also strategic decisions. At the same time, the implementation of AGI in sales would have to be accompanied

by extensive ethical considerations to ensure that the technology is used in line with company goals and societal norms. Finally, the prospect of ASI systems raises profound questions: Such a system could fundamentally change the entire economic and social fabric. In the context of sales, ASI could potentially optimize all aspects of the sales process, from market analysis and pricing to predicting and influencing customer behavior (Hamdan 2023). But with these possibilities come considerable risks. Control over a system that transcends the human intellect would be an immense challenge and requires comprehensive security mechanisms and ethical frameworks (Mühlhoff 2023).

It can be seen that the development and implementation of AI in sales is still in its infancy, especially when you consider the possibilities of AGI and ASI. While ANI systems have already brought significant progress and benefits, the question remains how future, more powerful AI systems can be used responsibly to achieve the greatest possible benefit for companies and society.

Morandín-Ahuerma (2022) and Haga (2022) describe AI as systems that exhibit capabilities such as logical thinking, learning, and problem-solving, which summarizes the basic principles of AI technology. These definitions are useful for understanding the foundation on which AI is built and emphasize the need to imitate human intelligence to tackle complex tasks.

The perspective of Tripathi (2021), which defines AI as the replication of human intelligence in machines, complements the picture by focusing on mimicking human behavior. This perspective opens up discussions about the limits and possibilities of AI, especially with regard to ethical issues and the potential influence on human decisions.

Finally, the definitions of Apoorva et al. (2018) and Salehi & Burgueño (2018) clarify the different dimensions that encompass both the development of intelligent agents and the solution of complex problems, as they are initially considered not only as tools for automating routine tasks, but are also increasingly perceived as strategic partners that can improve decision-making processes and increase competitiveness (Davenport et al., 2020).

Salesforce, an internationally renowned customer relationship management system, has also stated that data maintenance and updating is considered one of the biggest challenges (Salesforce, 2024). The high manual effort involved in maintaining CRM data, tracking customer data, and updating opportunities leads to inefficiencies and error-proneness. In addition, around 60% of sales teams struggle to correctly assess the likelihood of closing deals, leading to inefficient sales strategies (Gartner, 2019). Identifying and being able to reach the right decision-makers is another significant issue that significantly influences the success of deals for 70% of respondents (Forrester, 2021). Unexpected events such as budget cuts or strategic shifts on the part of customers also require a high degree of flexibility, which is difficult to achieve without technological support. The importance of AI in sales is further underlined by the results of the McKinsey study "The State of AI in Early 2024". According to this study, AI adoption has skyrocketed, with 72% of companies adopting AI, compared to 50% in previous years. In particular, 65% of organizations are using generative AI in at least one business function, showing that AI is no longer just used experimentally, but creates real business value. Companies report significant benefits such as cost reductions and revenue increases, especially in marketing, sales, product development, and IT (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Autor (year)	Importance of AI
Kruse (2024)	AI refers to systems that perform human-like intelligence such as learning, problem-solving, and language processing by analyzing data and making decisions; they are used in areas such as health, finance and marketing to increase efficiency and improve quality.
Arunagiri & Sumana (2023)	Modern AI includes techniques such as machine learning, deep learning, natural language processing, and computer vision, which perform tasks such as image recognition and speech understanding with precision; however, challenges remain in terms of data protection, fairness, bias and the explainability of AI systems.
Morandín-Ahuerma (2022)	AI is the ability of a machine or computer system to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as logical thinking, learning, and problem-solving. It is based on machine learning algorithms and technologies.
Haga (2022)	Systems are capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence, including learning, problem-solving, and perception.
Tripathi (2021)	It refers to the replication of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think like humans and imitate their actions. It has helped to increase efficiency in many sectors
Apoorva et al. (2018)	Developing intelligent agents includes problem-solving, learning, and interacting with the environment.
Salehi & Burgueño (2018)	This research field deals with the creation of machines and software with human-like intelligence to solve complex problems and optimize decisions.
Hamet & Tremblay (2017)	The use of computers to mimic intelligent behavior is done with minimal human intervention, including applications in robotics and medical diagnostics.

Table 1: Meanings of AI (Source: own representation)

The diversity of terms illustrates not only the variety of approaches, but also the evolving requirements and challenges associated with the implementation of AI technologies. A key requirement that sales reps place on AI systems is their acceptance. Chen and Zhou (2022) argue that the adoption of AI systems increases significantly when they are designed to be user-friendly and convey the feeling that their use supports employees' individual skills. In this context, management support plays a crucial role, as it strengthens trust in these technologies and reduces possible resistance (Kaponen et al. 2025).

In addition to acceptance, support for routine tasks is another critical aspect. Kaliuta (2023) and Fili (2025) highlight that AI can significantly contribute to the automation of routine tasks, especially in the management of customer relationships through CRM systems. Studies show that sales reps spend up to 50% of their daily working time on manual and administrative tasks. Integrating AI with CRM systems, such as Salesforce, allows companies to respond more efficiently to customer inquiries and increase customer loyalty. This automation not only leads to

increased efficiency, but also allows sales reps to focus on more strategic activities that add more value.

In addition, the feedback and adaptability of AI systems is seen as a crucial feature valued by sales reps. Hall et al. (2021) show that using AI to provide feedback and support adaptive sales strategies can significantly increase sales performance and improve employee retention with the organization. Kaliuta (2023) adds that AI-powered systems provide valuable decision-making tools that promote both consumer engagement and employee retention, resulting in better sales performance overall.

Current research uses a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to investigate the requirements of sales reps for AI-based systems. A relevant theory in this context is the Regulatory Focus Theory, which describes how the demands on sales reps can vary depending on their motivation. DeCarlo et al. (2021) emphasize that managers should consider the different effects of their specifications on employee motivation and satisfaction in order to optimally design AI systems.

In addition to the Regulatory Focus Theory, the Adaptive Selling Theory is of great importance, which suggests that sales reps should adapt their sales strategies to the specific needs of customers. Udayana and Farida (2020) argue that AI-powered systems can support this adaptation by providing relevant data analytics and predictive models. Kaliuta (2023) notes that by implementing AI, companies can not only streamline administrative tasks, but also create personalized user experiences to increase customer satisfaction.

Another important approach is Cognitive Process Analysis, which deals with the cognitive processes and knowledge structures of experienced sales staff. Shepherd and Rentz (2013) emphasize that a deeper understanding of decision-making and response patterns is crucial to overcome the challenges in the sales process. Kaliuta (2023) adds that understanding these cognitive processes makes it possible to design AI systems in such a way that they optimally support the specific requirements of sales reps.

Despite significant advances in research on the integration of AI in sales, significant research gaps remain. Many studies have not sufficiently taken into account how digital transformation affects the acceptance and use of AI in sales. Kaliuta (2023) and Dickie (2025) point out that the rapid progress in sales and CRM technologies holds numerous untapped potentials that should be examined in more detail in future studies.

In addition, research on the specific needs of sales reps from different industries and regions should be deepened to understand how different contexts can influence the requirements for AI systems. Qualitative studies, interviews, or surveys that include the perspectives of sales reps in different markets could provide valuable insights and help develop effective AI solutions.

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine the requirements of B2B sales employees for an AI-based sales assistant, a quantitative survey was conducted with the aim of gaining practical insights into the biggest challenges in everyday sales as well as the desired functions of an AI-supported system.

Initially, a sample of 83 B2B sales reps from various industries was recruited.

The data collection was carried out over a period of six weeks and was carried out online. The questionnaire consisted of both Likert scales to capture quantitative assessments of the biggest sales challenges and expected features of an AI assistant, as well as open-ended questions that offered participants the opportunity to describe their individual expectations and opinions.
Following the data collection, a comprehensive descriptive data analysis was carried out to identify central trends and frequencies. Particular attention was paid to the challenges that sales reps face in their day-to-day lives, as well as the desired features of an AI sparring partner.

The valuable insights into the needs of sales staff allow us to derive targeted recommendations for action for the development and implementation of an AI-based sales assistant that meets the requirements of modern, dynamic B2B sales.

RESULTS

The survey provided in-depth insights into the current challenges faced by B2B sales reps, as well as their expectations for an AI-based assistant.

Challenges in sales

A key finding of the survey is that data maintenance and updating was cited as one of the biggest challenges by over 80% of respondents. This task requires a lot of manual effort and in many cases leads to inefficiencies. Many sales reps said that regularly maintaining customer relationship management (CRM) data, tracking customer data, and manually updating opportunities is time-consuming and error-prone.

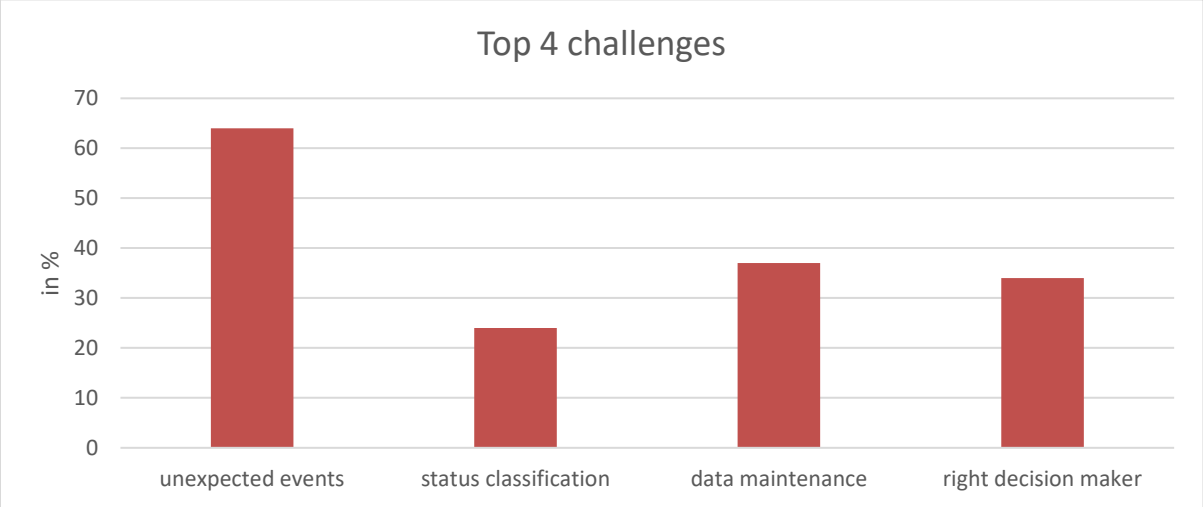

Figure 1: Top challenges in sales (Source: Own representation)

Another significant problem is the incorrect status classification of opportunities, which was described as problematic by around 60% of the participants. Many sales teams face the challenge of correctly estimating the likelihood of closing deals, which often leads to inefficient sales strategies as resources are directed to the wrong opportunities. In addition, 70% of respondents reported that they struggle to identify and reach the right decision-makers. This challenge in B2B

sales is proving to be particularly critical, as in many cases the success of a deal depends on reaching the relevant contacts quickly.

Unexpected events in the sales process, such as sudden budget cuts or postponements of strategic decisions by customers, are also a significant challenge. These unforeseen events require flexible adaptability, which is often difficult to achieve without technological support. Here, the respondents see considerable potential for support from AI-supported systems in order to be able to react to such changes at an early stage.

Expected features of an AI sparring partner

The results of the survey show that sales reps have clear expectations for the features of an AI-based assistant. First and foremost is the automation of repetitive tasks, which was cited as a key requirement by 70% of respondents. In particular, maintaining CRM data and sending follow-up emails were cited as examples of tasks that could be made much more efficient through automation.

Top 1	Automation of repetitive tasks, CRM, maintenance, follow-ups, etc.)
Top 2	Risk identification in the sales process (customer data and sales trends)
Top 3	Recommendations
Top 4	Real-time analysis (meetings, phone calls, etc.)
Top 5	Adaptation of sales strategy

Table 2: Top Features (Source: Own representation)

Also of great importance is risk identification in the sales process, which was described by 60% of respondents as a valuable function of an AI assistant. Sales reps want a system that identifies potential risks early on by analyzing customer data and sales trends. Such an assistant could help identify potentially problematic deals before they escalate. This requirement coincides with current research that emphasizes the role of predictive analytics in the sales process (Rainsberger 2021).

Half of those surveyed cited the provision of data-driven recommendations for action as another key function. Sales reps expect an AI-based assistant to make predictive suggestions based on historical sales data that increase the likelihood of a successful close. Such a system could help sales teams target their sales strategies to the most promising opportunities, increasing the efficiency of the sales process.

In addition, the survey highlighted the ability to analyze and personalize customer interactions in real-time as an important feature. Many attendees expect the AI assistant to be able to identify individual customer needs based on real-time data and suggest customized sales strategies. These personalized approaches are to be considered an essential factor for the success of B2B sales in the current times.

Willingness to pay for an AI assistant

The survey results on willingness to pay show that the majority of respondents are willing to pay for an AI-based assistant, as long as it offers the expected features. 65% of respondents said they would spend between €150 and €500 per month on such a system. Interestingly, it also revealed a group of participants who would be willing to pay up to €5000 per month if the assistant offered advanced features such as predictive analytics and comprehensive automation.

This data indicates that the perceived added value of an AI assistant is directly correlated with the willingness to pay. Sales reps are willing to invest in systems that not only automate simple tasks, but also provide strategic support through data-driven analytics. These findings are in line with the conclusions of research on AI-powered tools that promise a positive return on investment (ROI) for companies that use AI wisely

Other relevant aspects

In addition to the main requirements, participants also expressed concerns about integrating an AI assistant into existing CRM systems and communication platforms. 3/4 of respondents said that smooth integration is essential to take full advantage of such a system. Without this compatibility, there is a risk that the assistant will be perceived as an additional hurdle and thus decline acceptance in the company.

Another important aspect is the culture and mindset in the company. Some participants emphasized that adopting an AI-powered system is not only a technological challenge, but also requires cultural adaptation. Employees must be willing to accept the new technologies and integrate them into their work processes in order to derive the maximum benefit from the AI assistant.

DISCUSSION

The present discussion reflects the findings of the study, which aimed to determine the requirements of B2B sales staff for AI-based assistance systems and to identify the greatest challenges in everyday work.

The main results of the study show that sales reps need support above all in data maintenance, assessing sales opportunities and identifying decision-makers. At the same time, there was a high level of interest in the automation of repetitive tasks through AI as well as in data-driven recommendations for action. These findings confirm the hypothesis that AI in sales is increasingly seen as a necessary tool to increase efficiency and handle routine tasks.

The new findings of the study are based on the clear desire of sales staff for systems that not only automate, but also optimize strategic sales processes. AI systems that identify risks at an early stage and relevant decision-makers offer clear added value here. This is a central statement that the study underlines and which has already been partially covered in the literature on the topic of AI in sales. However, it also becomes clear that AI cannot replace all aspects of the sales process, especially in more complex interactions, as Fischer et al. (2022) have already shown. This discrepancy between routine and complex tasks shows that the human factor remains irreplaceable in sales.

The findings are in line with other research, especially that of Hyland (2023), which questions the excessive enthusiasm for AI tools like ChatGPT. While AI provides valuable support, Hyland emphasizes that a partnership between human intelligence and AI is needed to operate ethically and effectively. This critical perspective raises important questions about the limitations and risks of using AI in sales. Riva et al. (2022) also point out that while algorithms can predict human behavior, they do not necessarily lead to better decisions. These concerns confirm that over-reliance on algorithms could hinder the creative decision-making process.

The evaluation of the results clearly strengthens the assumption that AI in sales is a valuable tool for automation and risk assessment. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the technological support of AI systems still has its limits, especially when it comes to complex interpersonal interactions. Despite the potential benefits, the human factor remains critical to sales success, especially in complex negotiation situations and when building long-term customer relationships.

It remains unclear what long-term impact the implementation of AI systems will have on workplace dynamics and reliance on technology, although there is great potential for increasing efficiency in B2B sales. The challenge, however, is to find a balance between technological support and human capabilities. The human salesperson remains irreplaceable in complex sales processes, while AI can be a valuable support, especially for routine tasks and data analysis. Future research should focus on how the aspects – human and machine – can best work together to optimize sales in the long term. It is also important to take into account industry-specific characteristics and regional differences in order to optimally design the implementation of AI systems.

CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that AI plays a transformative role in sales, especially by automating repetitive tasks, providing data-driven recommendations for action, and personalizing customer interactions. These benefits increase efficiency and help sales reps focus on more strategic tasks. Nevertheless, the human factor remains irreplaceable in complex interactions and relationship building, which shows the limits of AI systems.

The successful implementation of AI requires careful integration into existing processes, accompanied by a positive corporate culture that supports change. Acceptance by employees and ensuring that the technology is used sensibly are crucial here.

In the long term, it will be important to develop hybrid models in which humans and AI work together optimally. These models can not only increase efficiency, but also promote innovation and customer satisfaction. The balance between technological support and human competence remains the key to sustainable success in sales.

Future research should focus on how this collaboration can be further improved to meet both economic and ethical requirements. AI is thus positioned not only as a tool, but as a strategic partner for modern sales.

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