Slow Down, Redesign, and Accelerate: Adaptations and Resilience on Business Sales Transformation amid COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic forced all the world to find new ways to 'get the work done.' Social isolation in particular shifts the work to primarily remote, which compelled us to reassess a particular set of work practices that were before inherently personal and high-touch in nature. Business-to-Business (B2B) sales practices have been already under digital transformation in the light of technology advances (e.g., advances in Social-Computing, Artificial Intelligence, and Blockchain technology), prior to COVID-19. In the new reality, plans had to be reviewed and strategy recreated while business kept going. In this position paper, we start a discuss on the impacts of the COVID-19 on B2B sales work practices and existing supporting technologies. We present a set of research questions to guide the investigation of B2B work practices in a post-COVID-19 world, considering the lessons learned during the crisis and how they impacted B2B digital transformation plans.

1 INTRODUCTION

Human practices have always been shaped by technology and, likewise, have informed the technologies designed and used by humans [13]. Today's work practices, which are strongly related to the technology that supports them, were forced to change due to recent work from home policies amid COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, work is being fundamentally transformed due to recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), Blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), and other disruptive technologies. It is incumbent upon us to explore how work practices are changing in response to both the advent of disruptive technologies and the realities of a post-COVID-19 world. This paper opens the discussion on how workers get their work done effectively and efficiently in a rapidly evolving work context of new policies, technologies, and organizational structures.

Understanding how work practices and organizational designs affect and are affected by emerging technologies is essential. The changes in work practices and organizational designs due to emerging technologies might have different motivations and necessities in time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people needed to make social norms more flexible and look for new ways to use technologies to replace in-person interaction. That new scenario made people turn to technology, using it in different ways or looking for other technologies to support their activities that needed to go into remote mode. Sometimes as a "necessary evil", but the mandatory aspect of the pandemic scenario offers research opportunities to investigate how technology can affect work practices and organizational designs. Once all people had the remote mode as the only way to interact, they had to find a way to make it work and get things done.

We select the B2B sales practices as our investigation context due to its importance in multiple business, the heavy use of technologies, and essential in-person interaction. The B2B sales practices are strongly based on sales professional and client relationship [2, 3]. That relationships continues to be fundamental for the sales digital transformation already in course. The idea is to provide the necessary technology support for sales teams to take a socially focused, relationship-oriented approach to selling in the digital domain. Take the best of the knowledge about the client to plan a tailored sales' experience and relationship [1].

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, the sales professional-client relationship had to be "reinvented" once remote-work policies were enforced around the world [2, 5]. During the social distancing period, sales professionals, which were used to face-to-face interaction, observed opportunity to reassess their travel plans to interact with clients, for example. They had the opportunity to realize that some types of interactions, especially with known clients, worked well in remote mode, saving time and reducing traveling costs. One important aspect that must be taken into account is that clients also needed to adapt themselves to mandatory social distancing during the pandemic for considering the remote mode. If clients had a choice, would they be open to a remote mode solution? Maybe yes for some cases.

The impact of technology on people's work practices, and vice-versa, has been subject of continuous research in many communities such as Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) [1] and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) [13]. The COVID-19 pandemic forced people to make the best of the technology they had available to get the work done. Through more advanced use of known tools or by the addition of new tools on their practices, people and organizations needed to adapt. This adaptation process offers the

[1]https://www.linkedin.com/business/sales/blog/customer-stories/how-microsoft-transformed-its-sales-practices-with-relationship-

opportunity to evaluate work practices, to assess what is done, how it is done, and why. Since the pandemic pushed us all into a remote world for a while, the parameters for essential work practices were adjusted and presented new challenges for organizations [5]. The technological support became, even more, an essential part of organizations and they need to evolve and adapt as much as the work practices. For a post-COVID-19 world, we can learn a lot from how people take ownership of the existing technology and how it affects their work practices. Moreover, the adaptation period during the pandemic can inform different research on emerging technologies for supporting work practices and organizational designs.

The COVID-19 crisis might be considered as an accelerator of business digital transformation [10], but it also brought the need to reassess the transformation's plans already in execution. A recent survey by Deloitte [5] interviewing executives from 32 segments found that 60% of them believe that there is a need to change the work model and organizational culture. The adjustment of organizational culture and work model to the new reality will emerge after the pandemic, and they will impact the new ways of working and producing. The survey also revealed that 40% of executives indicated that more investment in technology and connectivity (technological infrastructure) is needed, which should be considered in the *Recovery* and the *Thrive* phases. The pandemic's impacts on businesses should be handled considering different periods once the crisis was in place [5]:

- **Response** - the crisis has caused organizations to face the need to adapt their operations quickly to respond to impacts.
- **Recovery** - once the first scare from the crisis passes, organizations need to overcome the losses and keep their business going. They need to "live with COVID-19".
- **Thrive** - after the crisis organizations need to find their place in a post-COVID-19 world and pursue their business goals.

In this work, we focus on B2B work practices and tools, considering the COVID-19 crisis scenario. We believe that the lessons learned during the *Response* phase will be valuable inputs for the *Recovery* and *Thrive* phases. Our goal is to identify a set of research questions that can guide understanding the ongoing business sales transformation. We want to investigate the adaptation and resilience strategies amid the COVID-19 crisis and how they could impact sales transformation plans.

2 RELEVANT BODY OF WORK

The relationship between sales professionals and client decision-makers in B2B is key to a lasting, successful, and profitable collaboration between the two parties. Along the time, a sales professional builds that relationship in different ways, but mainly through a personal one-on-one relation. The business discussions and decisions happen in meetings, e-mails, and other formal ways to engage. Nevertheless, they can also happen more informally, while sales professionals and clients are socializing during a coffee, lunch, a break between formal meetings, or a business sales event. The relationship is more than just making business. It is also about building **social capital**. Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people like trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors. It bridges the space between people making cooperative action possible [4]. Social capital is understood as the glue that maintains social aggregation such as networks of personal relationships, communities, regions, or even whole nations [8].

The sales-client in a B2B relationship has the primary goal of "doing business". Each party involved has its business motivations and interests as organizations[8]. However, the human factor of that relationship also needs to be acknowledged. Trust is the basis of human social relationships, and it frames people's expectations about the following interactions along the time. It is an element of a relationship that is always under evolution and needs to be managed to preserve a long-term relationship [14]. When the relationship is mediated by technology, it is not only the interaction mode that changes, but the whole relationship dynamics and the trust needs to be re-assessed. Trust should not be viewed separately from technologies [12, 14]. Particularly, for a B2B relationship, mainly mediated by technology, the literature shows different dimensions to investigate trust: Benevolence, Integrity, Competence, Predictability, and Openness [12].

Those dimensions are essential for S&D (Sales and Development) professionals to establish rapport with clients. Rapport is associated with interactants having some perceived or real extrinsic similarity to one another. Previous studies show that rapport can influence trust and agreement that may develop a positive impact on sales outcomes [11, 15]. Most of the rapport building consists of physical contact which includes facial, gestural, and postural cues, as well as spatial configurations between interactants. Those constructs assist in setting a foundation and engaging customers in new business relationships [9]. Rapport builds credibility and leads to trust [11]. It is the starting point of a relationship with clients, and it is still under-research [6, 9]. The Figure 1 shows some of the attributes present in the relationship between sales professional and client decision-maker, which involves rapport building, dimensions of trust, and social capital resulting from formal and informal interactions.

A process of streamlining, updating, and digitally transforming S&D practices was already in course before the pandemic — from several players and already presented its own challenges [7]. The social distancing, the increased uncertainty and shifting in priorities in clients seem to be adding a layer of complexity on those challenges and, at the same time, accelerating the transformation of S&D processes [5].

2.1 Current Implications

There is a lot of concerns that the shift to remote interaction has impacted negatively the previously strong, personal relationships with the client' decision-makers [5]. At the same time, the lack of non- virtual business events to foment rapport and build social capital –for established clients and new players– seems to have affected negatively the strength of relationships and the ability to generate new opportunities [2].

The COVID-19 crisis has demanded a quick adaptation of B2B relationships. The clients and the sales professionals are working from home and they need to keep doing business. The remote mode is not optional anymore, so the relationship becomes even more dependable on technology support. Therefore, sales professionals and clients need to adapt the way they were used to interact to get

[2]http://cs.wellesley.edu/ mobileoffice/conversations/

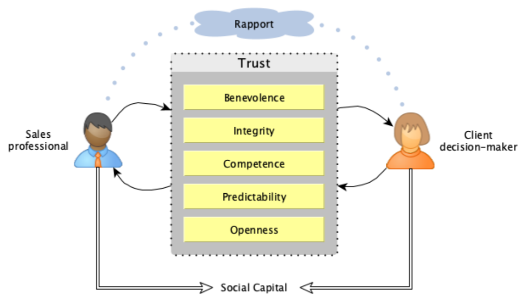

Figure 1: Relationship between sales professional and client decision-maker and presented attributes. Rapport building as the perceived or real extrinsic similarity to one another, dimensions of trust, and social capital built during interactions.

the work done and keep business going for both parties. In this new scenario, the sales professionals need to check which of their rapport building practices still work, which ones need adjustments, and which ones do not work anymore. Further, because of the crisis, both sides (client and sales professional) are simultaneously changing their business processes. Thus, assessing either social capital and rapport becomes even more challenging.

To prepare for the possible large transformation in sales practices, which may have been accelerated by social distancing and virtualization, companies should be prepared to answer questions such as:

- How to build social capital, rapport, and trust remotely with clients?
- Which dimensions of trust were impacted the most in the remote mode?
- How does a dynamic scenario of simultaneous transformations (i.e., both sides are businesses) affect the construction/maintenance of social capital and rapport?
- How to best keep its established relationships? How to create new ones?
- How to create processes to develop new business opportunities?
- How do people coordinate activities, communicate and get access to information, share knowledge/expertise, and the like?
- How do technologies enable or hinder them?
- How to measure social capital and rapport building in the remote mode?
- What technologies could support sales professionals in orchestrating the new activities?
- What forms of socio-technical arrangements afford (facilitate or hinder) different ways of working?
- What types of work configurations are better suited to face-to-face vs remote activities?
- What are the opportunities and possibilities for advanced technologies to transform and improve how work is done today?
- How the "forced" adoption of tools impacted the daily activities of both ends in the relationship between sales professional and client?
- What are the characteristics of technology that surpassed the challenge of being used by new target-users, in new contexts of use, and resulting in unforeseen experiences?

This position paper aims to open a conversation with symposium participants, exchange experiences on dealing with adversities caused by the current COVID-19 crisis, and the emergence of new social work practices adopted by sales professionals.

3 FINAL REMARKS

Currently, we are investigating how to assess social capital and rapport using several sources of data that reflect interaction patterns between the two client and sales professional amid COVID-19 crisis. Using empirical methods, we intend to unveil sales work practices of the *Response* phase of the pandemic (*when the crisis has caused organizations to face the need to adapt their operations quickly to respond to impacts*), for then envisioning future work practices and tools that will assist, and support sales professionals to cope with this new reality, and consequently, we expect that a smooth transformation will take place.

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