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B2B Sales Work after the Covid-19 pandemic

- Case company Phoenix Contact Oy



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B2B Sales Work after the Covid-19 pandemic

- Case company Phoenix Contact Oy

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people's working habits during the past two years. Salespersons have made almost all their contacts with the customers in the virtual environment as opposed to earlier face-to-face interactions. It is anticipated that these working methods will be mixed in the post-Covid-19 time as a hybrid sales model.

The present thesis aims to explore the changes in B2B sales work during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as study how B2B sales work should be organized after the pandemic. The study focuses on the Covid-19 pandemic, new practices in B2B sales, face-to-face selling, virtual selling, and the importance of B2B buying behavior.

Some suggestions on how the client company's, Phoenix Contact Oy's, sales work could be implemented and improved after the pandemic are made as a result of the study. The results are based on theoretical research and interview results.

Keywords:

the Covid-19 pandemic, B2B sales work, virtual sales, face-to-face selling, B2B buying behavior

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Max Nakari

B2B myyntityö koronapandemian jälkeen

- Phoenix Contact Oy:ssä

Koronapandemia on vaikuttanut ihmisten työskentelytapoihin kuluneen reilu kahden vuoden ajan. Myyntihenkilöt ovat tehneet tapaamisensa virtuaalisessa ympäristössä, jotka tavanomaisesti järjestettiin kasvotusten ennen koronapandemiaa. Erilaisten ennusteiden mukaan nämä työtavat tulevat sekoittumaan tulevaisuudessa korona-ajan jälkeen ja siitä työskentelytavasta tullaan käyttämään nimitystä hybridimyyntimalli.

Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on selvittää kuinka B2B myyntityö on muuttunut koronapandemian aikana sekä miten B2B myyntityö tulisi organisoida pandemian jälkeen. Opinnäytetyön teemoja ovat koronapandemia, myynnin tulevaisuus, kasvotusten tapahtuva myynti, virtuaalinen myynti sekä tulevaisuuden ostajien ostokäyttäytyminen.

Opinnäytetyön lopputuloksena on ehdotuksia, miten toimeksiantajan Phoenix Contact Oy:n B2B myyntityötä voisi toteuttaa sekä mahdollisesti parantaa pandemian jälkeisessä ajassa. Lopputulokset perustuvat teorian tutkimiseen sekä haastattelujen tuloksiin.

Asiasanat:

Covid-19, koronapandemia, B2B myyntityö, virtuaalinen myynti, kasvotusten tapahtuva myynti, organisaatioiden ostokäyttäytyminen

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation of abbreviation
AI	Artificial Intelligence
B2B	Business-to-Business
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and the commissioner

Society has faced one of the biggest shocks and the working industry's massive changes in the past two years. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed many things in people's lives, and society is slowly starting to open again for life how it was before the pandemic. Society is not going straight back to old habits and ways of doing work because the change has been massive. Many of the work have been made remote and in the world of sales, this means that virtual meetings have become familiar for the B2B salespersons. (Fogarty et al., 2020.)

B2B sales have been in the phase of change for a long time regarding digitalization which has affected strongly sales transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has advanced the need for change in sales processes. Salespersons are getting multiple contacts via different channels, so they need guidelines on how to manage all these possibilities in the future's sales environment. This leads to a situation where salespersons need to keep their knowledge updated all the time to be successful in their work. (Mattila et al., 2021, 113-115.)

There are a lot of new possibilities like social selling and artificial intelligence for the salespersons to be on the level that the modern sales environment demands. Shanks (2016) states that social selling demands an effort from the salesperson to be active in the different social media channels to engage potential buyers' attention which could create potential leads and transactions. Syam and Sharma (2018) state that artificial intelligence could help salespersons in many tasks like analyzing customer data which can be developed further for analyzing customers' habits and methods.

Salespersons need to evolve the sales process that responds to the buying journey. B2B buyers are demanding proactive and innovative manners from the salespersons but also the real reason what creates the value for them. This

means that the sales process needs to be made on a very specific level to answer buyers' needs the value. (Kenner et al. 2020, 13-15.)

B2B sales have changed a lot during the Covid-19 pandemic and predictions are saying that it will keep changing during the next years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, society has taken many years of steps forward in the digital environment and it has probably boosted the pace of the next changes (Dickerson, 2021.). This thesis aims to answer how those massive changes have affected the B2B sales work and how B2B sales work should be organized after the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic surprised the whole world in the spring of 2020. Countries have had different Covid-19 restrictions in everyday life like wearing facemasks and doing remote work. There have been oppositions between health versus economy and risk group versus other people which have caused different approaches to the pandemic situation. The problem with the Covid-19 pandemic is that instead of thinking about the future, people need to survive in everyday life. It has made predicting and thinking of the future more unclear than before. (Dufva et al., 2020, 2.)

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed people's daily routines and the whole global environment. Predictions in 2020 said that Covid-19 would be over faster than thought like in a year but people have lived long periods with different restrictions. This crisis has led society to a situation where everything is under uncertainty. People should now consider old habits and ways to think if there are a need and opportunities for change. (Dufva et al., 2020, 3.)

The usage of different technologies has increased massively during the Covid-19 pandemic. Technologies provide great tools and opportunities in both working and leisure environments. Technology is developing fast, and people are using new applications at a fast pace. This has led to a situation where technology affects procedures in every sector. Technology has offered new ways of doing weekday routines as grocery stores have moved to an online platform. (Dufva et al., 2020, 59-61.)

Taloustutkimus made a study of the remote work based on Yle's request. This study indicated that in Finland over one million people have worked remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Over half of the Finnish employees have done remote work also in normal times before the Covid-19 pandemic. Probably one reason why remote work is popular for Finnish employees is that they do not have to use time on the way to work and they do not have to pay the expenses of public transportation or a car. Of course, it depends on the environment of the employees' home offices, if employees are having children playing around which needs attention, employees would probably do their work rather at the normal office. The most surprising result was that even half of those million employees want to continue remote work when the pandemic is over. (Pantsu, 2020.)

The Covid-19 restrictions have been alternately canceled and tightened so society has had difficulties adapting to these changes. The Finnish government has canceled the Covid-19 restrictions again in March 2022 so that society's life would be easier. Finnish citizens have quite good coverage of the vaccinations and Finland has used earlier the EU COVID-19 certificate but at the moment it is banned. People can now have meetings and events which make it easier to see each other. (Valtioneuvosto, 2022.)

The commissioner for this thesis is Phoenix Contact Oy which is a subsidiary of the German company Phoenix Contact GmbH & Co. The company is a globally growing company that focuses on future-oriented components, systems, and solutions in the fields of electrical engineering, electronics, and automation. Phoenix Contact Oy's target is to offer the market the best service and its mission is to empower the all-electric society. The company offers innovative and user-friendly products and a lot of interaction and training with customers. The company has over 60,000 products and customers can even customize their versions of the products. Phoenix Contact Oy's vision is to be the most trusted brand in the industry. (Phoenix Contact, 2022.)

Because Phoenix Contact Oy is working in industrial automation and have a large product portfolio, this thesis aims to research how the B2B sales work of

Phoenix Contact Oy should be organized in the future. In addition to the large product portfolio, a lot of training had been made with customers before the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis aims to find answers to which would be the most successful methods and channels for Phoenix Contact's salespersons to interact with their existing customers after the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Aim of the thesis and research questions

This thesis aims to answer how B2B sales should be organized in industrial automation in the case company, i.e. how the commissioner should act in the modern sales environment. Theoretical research narrowed the research to the following themes the Covid-19 pandemic, B2B sales work, face-to-face selling, virtual selling, and B2B buying behavior. The subject is huge so it will be narrowed to how actual selling work should be done after the Covid-19 pandemic according to the research by comparing the commissioner's salespersons and existing customers' opinions on the subject.

The thesis aims to answer for following research questions:

1. How B2B sales work should be organized after the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What is the difference between salespersons' and buyers' opinions of the sales interactions after the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What do salespersons and buyers value in the modern sales/buying processes?

Table 1 shows the schedule of the thesis work and what tasks the thesis work has included. Thesis work started in the autumn of 2021 and it ended in the spring of 2022.

Table 1: Schedule of the thesis work

TASKS	Sep- Oct 2021	Oct 2021	Oct- Nov 2021	Nov- Dec 2021	Jan- Mar 2022	April 2022	May 2022
Preliminary research plan							
First meeting with the commissioner							
Final thesis plan							
Literature review							
Contract with the commissioner							
Interviews and questionnaires							
First version of the thesis							
Final version of the thesis							

1.3 The qualitative research

The qualitative research method tries to understand the problem of the case and in that way, answer the question of what the topic is about. This leads to a situation where the research problem or question is not known and what things affect it. Qualitative research tries to find answers and solutions to the problem. (Kananen, 2019, 25-26.)

Qualitative research was used as the research method for this thesis. The qualitative method was chosen to get a deeper knowledge of the B2B sales works from the perspective of the Phoenix Contact Oy salespersons. The first part of the qualitative research was made by interviewing six salespersons in different sales areas and product portfolios, but the size of the commissioner is relatively small, so all the interviewees will be named as salespersons. Interviews were semi-structured with different areas of B2B selling work. Questions of the interviews were open-ended to get more interviewees' opinions on the subject. Interviews were made with six salespersons via virtual meetings.

The second part of the qualitative research was made by interviewing four existing customers of the Phoenix Contact Oy who are taking part in buying decisions. Roles of the customers had differences, but they have had a role in the buying decision making. Existing customers' companies and titles are anonymous in this research. Interviews were made to analyze customers' thoughts from the other side's perspective on this topic. Comparing interview results from both perspectives, the commissioner got interesting data on how to improve their selling process and methods in the future.

2 B2B SALES WORK AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2.1 New directions in B2B sales

B2B sales have faced big changes during the last years. One of the biggest changes is the digital transformation in the sales and change from selling products or services to value-based selling. Buyers are using multiple channels, so they are waiting that those salespersons are providing information too in multiple channels. From the sales ecosystem perspective, salespersons should offer more information and new value propositions in the digital channels. The reason behind this is that the sales ecosystem has mixed several actors like sales and marketing in the sales process and this leads to the situation that sales management should adapt to the digital transformation. (Alamäki et al., 2021, 298-299.)

Service companies are already adapting value-based selling to sales processes. Service companies need to provide new solutions and create value for the customers. Companies need to find out solutions for the pain points of the customer at the right moments to form a long and successful customer relationship. Companies can have great experts, but they probably cannot communicate and assure in a manner that buyers are demanding so that is the reason why salespersons need to have their customer communication skills updated all the time. (Alamäki et al., 2021, 306-308.)

Buying journey in B2B sales has changed crucially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Everything has been made remote for two years, so it has allowed buyers to use new technologies in their buying processes. B2B sales teams need to understand this change and adapt new technologies and methods to succeed in the market. (Highley, 2021.)

B2B sales teams need to be trained in digital skills. A sales team needs to have the skills to be available in different channels and provide useful and important content to existing and potential customers. For example, LinkedIn has grown

into an almost equal contact channel with email and phone calls. This means that social selling is even more important nowadays than before. Salespersons need to build a good personal brand on social media platforms to attract potential customers. Salespersons need also post relevant content to different channels to differentiate from competitors. Sales teams can also use social media to get knowledge of buyers and understand their needs and prepare themselves to message them. (Highley, 2021.)

Social selling is an important part of the future's B2B selling. Many of the potential buyers are starting their research from different online platforms. If the selling company is not active and present on the Internet, buyers will probably not choose them. There are many useful social platforms for companies to be present like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. Many buyers are already making their first sorting of potential suppliers just by searching their websites and social platforms so a company should prepare those well. (Shanks, 2016, 26-29.)

Building a personal brand can be a big advantage for a salesperson. When a salesperson has a personal brand, it can open new opportunities more quickly and easier, and also it can help to increase sales and to win the deals. When the salesperson's brand is enough big and strong he/she can become the voice of the whole industry he/she represents. The path to a strong personal brand starts with the salesperson's need to find buyers or buying committee, educate and engage them and in the end develop a whole network of people who are eager to help each other. (Shanks, 2016, 58-60.)

A company should educate its salespersons to leverage content that is suitable for their potential buyer's journey. Salespersons could offer insights from the market and some inside information that is suitable to share on social channels. Overall, content should be answering buyers' questions about why, how, and who? Especially with the why questions salespersons can engage their potential buyers to be in conversation with them. The key idea of leveraging content for potential buyers is that salespersons should generate content that

excites potential buyers and same time offer solutions and products to solve buyers' problems. (Shanks, 2016, 78-83.)

Digital sales transformation needs to be planned well at the strategic level. Companies need to analyze which of the customers are most valuable in this digital transformation perspective. Customer portfolios can be prioritized with the help of AI and can be analyzed which customers will need face-to-face meetings and which could be handled in digital channels. All of this will help in the efficiency of the company. (Bharadwaj et al., 2020, 109-111.)

B2B salespersons should not be afraid of using technology in their sales processes. Technology can be implemented as part of the sales process to measure how products and services are performed in the market and in that company can get a better customer experience in the end which can be turned into sales revenue. Technology can help in the areas where work can be automated so a salesperson can focus on actual sales work. The company's technology and digital performance should be on a good level because for example bad and slow information technology will affect harmful to customer experience. (Holma et al., 2021, 120-125.)

Companies should adopt a hybrid sales model in their selling strategy. They need to find out the right channels to contact their customers with the right messages to keep up with these changes in buying processes. Gartner's prediction says that even 80% of B2B sales interactions will be happening via digital channels in 2025. This means that companies need to offer the right channels but also alternative channels to contact the company at the right time and in the method that the buyer wants. (Highley, 2021.)

Future salespersons should understand that a meeting must be planned carefully, and it should have an agenda. It does not matter if it is in a virtual environment or face-to-face, but planning must be made carefully. Research has shown that 60% of salespersons are expecting to have more virtual meetings than before the Covid-19 pandemic. Customers are also waiting that salespersons are available in both face-to-face and virtual environments. This

leads to a situation that which salespersons need to be prepared for both situations to be successful in their sales work. Figure 1 shows the estimation of how future virtual sales meetings might be by percentages in different scenarios. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 48-50.)

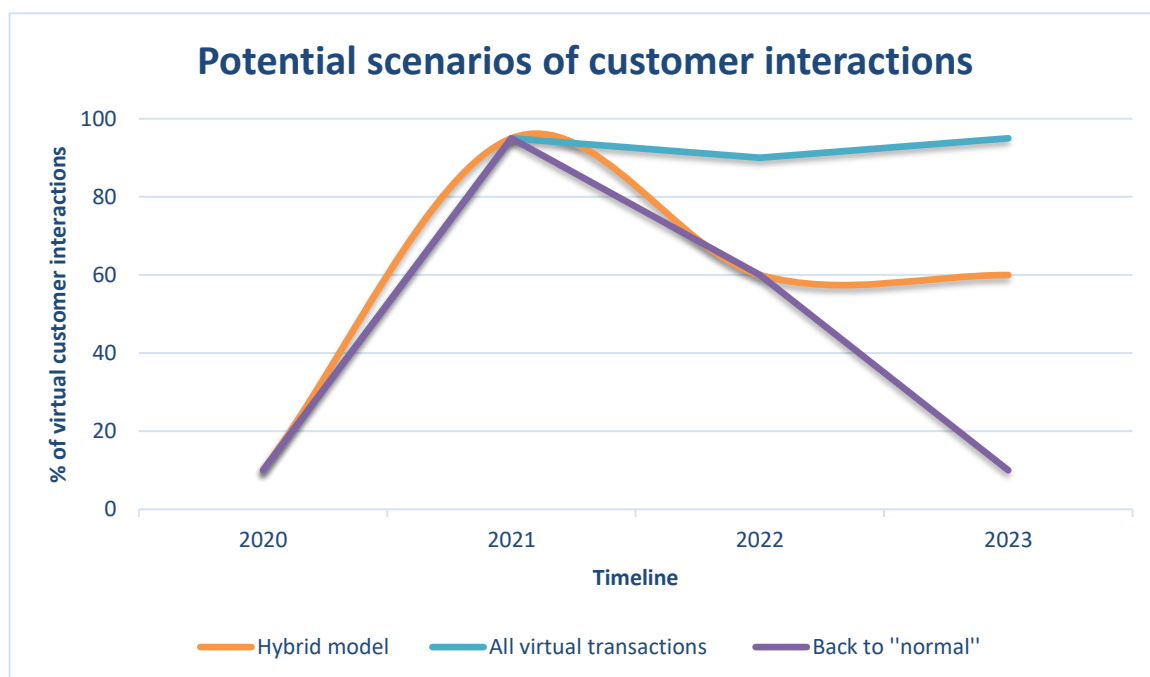


Figure 1: The Hybrid sales model. Adapted from (Kvedare et al., 2021, 50.)

As Figure 1 shows, it cannot be said which of these scenarios will happen and it can vary from the industry because they have a different amount of meetings. The advantage of the hybrid sales model is that nowadays B2B buying processes are involving multiple decision-makers which could be hard to get into one room for a face-to-face meeting. Now people can invite different experts and seniors to take part in a virtual meeting for short time to give their opinion on the subject or deal. The hybrid sales model also helps both salespersons and customers that they do not have to have face-to-face meetings at every step of the buying process. Now they can have short virtual interactions that how the project or process is going and are there any new information to share. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 50-56.)

Earlier before the Covid-19 pandemic took over the world, typically salespersons had estimated one face-to-face meeting per day with a customer and it took a lot of his/her time to prepare and travel to the meeting. When the Covid-19 pandemic took over the world, salespersons could easily have multiple virtual meetings with different customers per day. This led to a situation where meetings are shorter and more focused on decided agenda. General virtual meetings have helped salespersons to have more touchpoints with their customers and to help them in real-time. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 146-150.)

Meetings are shorter and stricter to decided agenda, so salespersons do not be prepared for long and stressful presentations. Customers can be more satisfied when salespersons are contacting their customers more often and having interactions. Having more touchpoints and efficient virtual meetings with the customers will probably lead to a situation where the hybrid sales model will exist in the post-Covid-19 time. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 146-150.)

2.2 Face-to-face selling

A successful B2B sales meeting is where both salesperson and customer are making open dialogue which helps both parties to be equal and find the real value for the relationship. A salesperson needs to be interactive in the meeting to keep the customer active and ask the right questions to find out the new potential value which can lead to success. The key thing is to find a common understanding from both sides which can lead to successful value co-creation. (Alamäki et al., 2015, 1039-1041.)

People are thought that is face-to-face selling coming to an end because of the Covid-19 pandemic but that is too narrow thinking. There are different products and services which are perfectly designed for face-to-face selling. There are also products and services which can be sold better in virtual channels and then products that can be sold even without a salesperson. Key thing is to find the right sales channels for the company by following where their potential

customers or buyers are, and which channels they prefer to use. (Blount, 2020, 8-10.)

When thinking of negotiating with a customer, most salespersons prefer face-to-face meetings because the best way to get a customer's trust is to be together physically. It is easier to show and notice nonverbal things like facial expressions and body language in a face-to-face meeting than in a virtual meeting. Salespersons trust their interpersonal relationships and charisma to attract customers. These can be called soft skills and they are harder to show in virtual meetings. (Kvedare et al., 2021, XI.)

Trust is one of the most important parts of a successful sales relationship and for most of the time in history, people have built it in face-to-face interactions. It is harder to build trust in a virtual environment versus face-to-face. Estimation says that level of trust can even drop by 83% in a virtual environment. People can get easier trust and engagement in face-to-face interactions so that can be one reason why they are rather having them. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 17-21.)

A company's sales process should be planned well so that salespersons know when it is the right time to have face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face interactions with customers can be necessary when salespersons are building trust and in the end when planning to close the deal with the customer. The sales process should be planned to be effective because it will affect to company's performance and costs which the sales management level is interested in. Sometimes a phone call can be enough and sometimes face-to-face meetings are necessary. The main point is that salespersons are using the right channels in the right situation and are talking human-to-human to give a great experience for the customers. (Blount, 2020, 29-32.)

2.3 Virtual selling

Virtual selling has existed for a long time but the Covid-19 pandemic forced companies to be represented in the virtual environment. Companies were not prepared for the change and they needed to improve their sales interactions.

Virtual selling is happening in the virtual environment so many of the traditional things like body language cannot be seen so well as in a face-to-face meeting. Planning and inviting participants to the virtual meetings is the most important stage to being successful in virtual selling. A salesperson needs to invite the right decision-makers to the virtual meeting and make background checks to be prepared for a perfect way to the meeting. (Kenner et al., 2020, 62-65.)

Society will face the fourth industrial revolution in the future and it will be boosted via digitization and different technologies like AI and machine learning. Earlier different tasks were helped with different technologies and machines but humans are still controlling and making most decisions. Estimations provide that in the future machines and technologies will make decisions on behalf of humans. These solutions will help future salespersons to do actual sales work when parts of the sales process can be automated with help of technologies. (Syam et al., 2018, 135-140.)

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, 50% of the salespersons believed that they could act perfectly in a virtual environment, but experts have revealed that only 12% were acting properly. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many salespersons have trained in a virtual environment and are now used to it. The reason why salespersons will probably continue to do many of the meetings virtually is that they can have more meetings in a day when they do not have to travel to customers. In some situations, a face-to-face meeting is necessary when there are important customers or topics in the meeting and parties need to convince each other. (Kvedare et al., 2021, XI-XIX.)

The digital change has been noticeable already before the Covid-19 pandemic in both B2C and B2B sectors but the Covid-19 pandemic boosted massively the situation and B2B companies had also adapted to the digital environment. Digital sales interactions have replaced traditional sales interactions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Approximately 90 percent of the B2B salespersons have transformed their sales work for virtual selling, i.e. videoconferences or mobile calls. (Gavin et al., 2020.)

Virtual selling is going to stay after the Covid-19 pandemic. Research has found that over 70% of companies will run virtual meetings with customers in the future. This means that the whole sales industry has changed and traveling to customers will not be so common anymore in the future. This means that it is easier to contact customers abroad when salespersons do not have to travel abroad to meet international customers. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 5-8.)

Virtual selling is not only Microsoft Teams or Zoom video calls because every contact without a face-to-face meeting can be described as virtual selling. Phone calls and emails which are the traditional way to contact customers are also a part of virtual selling. Earlier salespersons were used to close deals in face-to-face meetings, and this is the thing which can be changed in the next years. (Blount, 2020, 18-20.)

People can have a lack of trust in virtual meetings. Trust is one of the most important things behind successful selling. This leads to a situation where to be successful in virtual meetings, people should engage more with their audience or customers. Otherwise, potential customers can be doing other tasks during the meeting because they do not feel the engagement in the meeting. Without engagement, it is hard to build trust in the virtual environment. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 20-22.)

A virtual environment can cause different barriers between people. Barriers can be divided into physical, social, cultural, and technological. Physical barriers mean that people cannot see others' nonverbal interactions in virtual meetings like in face-to-face meetings. Social barriers are that when people are in virtual meetings social interaction can be reduced and people are straight going to agenda but because humans are like social animals this can reduce trust between seller and buyer. Overall, when face-to-face small talk can be skipped in the virtual meetings this can lead to reduced trust and even to an impactful meeting. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 22-25.)

Cultural barriers can be divided into people's backgrounds, personalities, and corporate differences. All these cultural barriers can occur easier in a virtual

environment because the risk of misunderstanding is a lot bigger in a virtual environment. Technological barriers are unpredictable problems in network connection that can cause bad sound or image quality which of course affects the presence of the speaker. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 24-28.)

Virtual environment barriers can be solved to get a virtual experience better. Probably the biggest thing in virtual meetings is to have the camera open, it is positioned the right way that body language can be seen, and the user has virtual background or background is suitable for the situation. People should also prepare time for the welcoming to build trust and engagement. If the agenda goes straight to the topic, customers can feel they are left out of the meeting. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 28-35.)

When thinking of cultural barriers in virtual meetings, people as hosts should be aware of where and what kind of people are joining this meeting and take note of potential cultural differences. If there are a lot of people, there is often a need for a co-host to secure that the virtual meeting will run smoothly. Technological barriers are always unexpected, but people should be prepared for them like having a plan B if something goes wrong. (Kvedare et al., 2021, 35-40.)

Sales digitization and usage of AI technologies have raised in recent years. Earlier tasks like lead generation have to be done by humans but nowadays it can be made with the help of AI. The key idea of sales digital transformation is that with the help of AI, companies can automate their simpler tasks so that salespersons can focus on performing the actual sales work to create value for the customers. Same time these technological solutions can make companies' performance more efficient (Singh et al., 2019, 2-10.)

Companies can measure their salespersons' digital sales interactions with the help of AI. Salespersons are acting in the digital channels so there is a lot of video and audio footage of the interactions between seller and buyer. AI can analyze the seller's voice tone, facial expressions, and manners to get the best knowledge of the most successful ways to act in virtual meetings. AI can make

salespersons' digital sales interaction more effective and innovative. (Bharadwaj et al., 2020, 106-110.)

2.4 Importance of B2B buying behavior

When thinking of B2B sales in the future, a company needs to know how B2B buyers are going to react to this digital change. Selling companies should know how their customer's purchasing processes are made and how they make decisions based on them. Salesperson and buyer interaction is one of the most important parts of the process but there are also other things to concern. When both salesperson and buyer have clear steps in the process, they can influence each other and make the decision easier and more effective. (Cheverton et al., 2011, 38.)

The purchasing process can be described simply that there is a company that is looking for a product or service and want to find the supplier who will deliver it to them. After that buyer should place a purchase order with a salesperson and the selling company will deliver products to the buyer. In the end, the buyer will receive an invoice and needs to pay it to the selling company. (Cheverton et al., 2011, 38.)

Figure 2 shows how the purchasing process is divided into five parts in a detailed way: Specify, Source, Negotiate, Contract and Follow-up. (Cheverton et al., 2011, 38.)



Figure 2: The basic procurement process. Adapted from (Cheverton et al., 2011, 39.)

As mentioned, Figure 2 points out the basic steps of the purchasing process. But the purchasing processes have changed overall in the last decades. The reason for this is that buyers have nowadays different tools to analyze suppliers. With these tools, buyers can have an advantage in the selling negotiations because they can have more information about the selling company than the salesperson has about the buying company. This has led to a situation in that buyers have a bigger advantage in the market. (Cheverton et al., 2011, 89.)

Customer experience is playing a key role when talking of B2B sales work. Customer experience can be built and made remarkable via customer journey. Salespersons are getting multiple contacts in different channels and the whole customer experience process is more social than ever. Salespersons should be able to build the customer journey in a way that responds to the modern customer experience where customers are aware of value-based solutions. (Lemon et al., 2016, 69-74.)

Customer experience starts to build up already before the concrete purchase or cooperation between companies have happened. Customer experience can be described as how a customer feels about some company and nowadays it is playing a crucial role in the B2B sector. Customer experience is facing big changes now in the B2B sector because the B2C sector is more demanding, and it is also shaping how the B2B sector's customer experience will be in the future. (Holma et al., 2021, 16-21.)

Nowadays buying companies want to have better information about the suppliers. In B2B sector, buying companies use different tools and methods to

lower their costs and make the buying process more efficient. More employees are affecting buying decisions in the B2B companies, not just the purchasers. This leads to a situation where buying journeys are longer and more complex than before. Companies can have buying groups or committees for buying decision making and they also trust peers' opinions of different suppliers. (B2B Buyer's survey report, 2017.)

B2B buyers want more customer-centralized service from the suppliers. This means that salespersons need to offer important information to buyers to convince them to buy from this supplier. Salespersons need to tailor a unique experience for the buyers so that they know they will get perfect service also after the purchase is made. This leads to a situation that buying journey needs to be complete to give guidance also afterward. Buyers are more likely to choose their supplier when a salesperson can communicate and handle meetings in a positive manner. (B2B Buyer's survey report, 2017.)

Practical studies have estimated that B2B buyers can make close to 60% of their purchase decisions before contacting the potential supplier. This has changed the way how companies are marketing and contacting customers like traditional advertisements have decreased. Sales companies are facing troubles with how to transform their sales processes to demand the modern B2B buyers' needs, even companies recognize the need for the change. Marketing communications are also facing changes due to the needs of B2B buyers. B2B buyers are demanding more value-based and creative marketing to meet their needs. (Alamäki et al., 2021, 298-300.)

B2B buyers need basic information like contact information and understanding of products or services but also what kind of value it will give to the buying company. B2B buyers want to know what is the real value that a selling company's product or service will give to them and what better it has to offer. There might be a need for product or service experts to contact buyers to convince them of the value. Overall, B2B buyers are expecting proactive manners and adaptive value propositions from the selling companies. (Alamäki et al., 2021, 308-309.)

A surprising result was that B2B buyers do not see social media channels like LinkedIn or Twitter as important. Social media's value can vary in the industry so that can explain the result. Social media can be seen easily as a waste of time because of the massive amount of information and some of the information can be mixed with personal life and interests. B2B buyers see that it is even though good tool for networking and following business trends. (Alamäki et al., 2021, 308-310.)

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed B2B buying because buyers have to do their work in the digital environment. McKinsey & Company's study states that 70-80 percent of the B2B buyers and sellers want to continue in the virtual environment. The reason behind this is that buyers are having better access to information and they can place orders or get service better and faster. B2B buyers are liking the faster pace of acting in the virtual environment than in the face-to-face meetings. This leads to a situation in which approximately only 20 percent want to go back to old normal. (Bages-Amat et al., 2020.)

B2B buyers are in increased demand for virtual meetings with salespersons. Studies say that 68% of B2B buyers prefer virtual meetings because they have better access to information, and it offers greater convenience from the buyer's perspective. According to studies, 17% of the B2B buyers are considering a purchase when they are meeting potential suppliers. Almost 27% of the B2B buyers are researching the potential suppliers independently on the Internet. When B2B buyer is thinking of a new supplier, the company's website and their digital inbound marketing like webinars and blogs are playing a crucial role. (Bharadwaj et al., 2020, 106-107.)

Kaski et al. (2017) state in their study that B2B buyers can have varied expectations for the B2B sales meetings versus salespersons. The study has divided B2B sales meetings into different themes to see how buyer and seller expectations can differ from each other. Both parties see creating dialogue as an important part of the meeting for building trust and engagement. The buyer and salesperson agreed that the salesperson needs to have enough knowledge of the product or service to create value for the buyer. Both parties see

adaptability as an important part of the B2B sales meeting. (Kaski et al., 2017, 50-51.)

Buyers and salespersons are having different opinions of the sales meetings when comparing different themes. Buyers expect more customer knowledge and insights from the salespersons meaning that salespersons should be prepared for sales meetings having good knowledge of their customers or potential customers' daily processes and backgrounds. Buyers would like to have a long-term partnership and they noticed that salespersons can in some situations only see meetings in a one-off sale. Buyers feel that salespersons should offer new insights and ideas for the buyer's business, not only selling a product, services, or solutions. Salespersons know the importance of the follow-up process, but buyers are not satisfied with how the process is handled because too often buyers must ask how the case is going. (Kaski et al., 2017, 51-54.)

Buyers are having higher expectations versus salespersons in the B2B sales meetings. Buyers are expecting innovativeness, insights, future orientation, and potential for long-term relationships. Salespersons are more straightforward and focused on creating value for the buyer's existing problems and how to solve them. Salespersons see that they need to have good behavior and personal skills to convince B2B buyers. After all, these can vary from the industry and experience, and how both sides see this subject. (Kaski et al., 2017, 53-54.)

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 The research method

At the beginning of the research, the author should decide which methods are going to be used in the research. The research problem can help the writer to choose what kind of research would be the most suitable one. Theoretical research can help to lead to the right research problem and area which can then be turned into qualitative or quantitative research or even both methods. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008, 13-14.)

The suitable kind of research problem will lead the writer to the right research methods. The research problem will be divided into research questions that will help to research the subject. The methodology of the research should be answering the research questions. Key idea is to find out the research problem in which thesis research will lead the author to the results. (Kananen, 2019, 21-25.)

The key idea of the qualitative research method is that it tries to understand the problem of the subject and with the help of the research find out answers. This leads to a situation where the research problem or question is not known and what things are affecting it. The qualitative research method offers deeper aspects to the research subject and problem. (Kananen, 2019, 25-26.)

Research problem and theoretical research will give the writer information on which methods should be used in the research. The qualitative method gives more perspective to the interviewees than quantitative research like a questionnaire. The qualitative method gives a deeper and more dimensional way to analyze the results. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008, 26-30.)

The research problem for this study was based on the commissioner's and thesis author's interest in this topic and during the process, theoretical research formalized to the direction of how B2B sales work should be done after the pandemic in the commissioner. Research questions were more specific to this

topic and aimed to answer this research problem. The qualitative method as interviewing was chosen as the research method for this study to get deeper and more valuable insights into this topic.

3.2 Data collection

Interviews are one of the most common ways to make research. The biggest advantage of the interview is that even if it is semi-structured, the researcher can ask deeper questions to get more aspects of the questions and the subject. Interviews must be well-prepared, and the interviewer should act in a neutral way. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008, 34-36.)

This research was conducted in two different parts: interviews with salespersons of the commissioner Phoenix Contact Oy and interviews with existing customers of the Phoenix Contact Oy. Interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes Teams meetings with six different salespersons from the commissioner and with four existing customers of the Phoenix Contact Oy with different roles who are taking part in the buying decisions.

Interviews were handled in a semi-structured manner. There were open-ended questions and all of the invited salespersons were eager to answer the interviews. Salespersons thought that questions were understandable and answered all questions. Existing customers were giving important information from the other side of the sales process and they also thought that questions were understandable and could answer all of them. Some of the existing customers did not want to participate in this interview because they were hurried in their work.

Table 2 shows the participants of the interviews. Salespersons were having different roles in the commissioner, but titles are not mentioned in this research. Existing customers were from different size companies.

Table 2: Participants of the interviews

Person	Role in the company	Target group	Length of the interview
Person A	Salesperson	Commissioner	29 min
Person B	Salesperson	Commissioner	25 min
Person C	Salesperson	Commissioner	35 min
Person D	Salesperson	Commissioner	39 min
Person E	Salesperson	Commissioner	24 min
Person F	Salesperson	Commissioner	33 min
Person G	Buying committee	Customer	22 min
Person H	Buying committee	Customer	19 min
Person I	Buying committee	Customer	28 min
Person J	Buying committee	Customer	17 min

Person A interview was the pilot interview and the salesperson liked the theme and questions so interviews could start to run and the pilot interview is also taking noted in results. Interviews were held during weeks 15-17 and interviewees were contacted via email. First cover letter designed for commissioner's salespersons (Appendix 1) and questions (Appendix 1). Second cover letter designed for the commissioner's existing customers (Appendix 2) and questions (Appendix 2). Cover letters and questions were already sent to interviewees in the invitation so they could be prepared for the questions they are going to answer.

3.3 Analysis

Analysis of the collected data will be divided into three parts. First analyzing results of the interviews with salespersons, second results of the interviews with existing customers, and then third mixing the results of both interviews to get profitable data for the conclusion of this research.

Interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed after the interviews. Afterward, the data was analyzed, and it was removed from the writer's computer. This secures the respondents' safe participation in this research.

The collected data should be analyzed close to the interviews. Otherwise, the interviewer can forget key findings of the interviews. The analysis starts in the interviews when the interviewer is noticing themes and phenomena behind the research. The interviewer should decide by which method interviews should be analyzed to get the results. One method is to transcribe the interviews and based on those findings the author can point out the key results of the research. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008, 135-140.)

The collected data was analyzed by comparing it to key findings of the theoretical research. Afterward transcription of the video recordings guaranteed that the author could focus on the interviewing and afterward key points of the answers could be noted. Key points of the results will be noted in the next chapter.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Salespersons opinions

This part of the results will be handling the answers of the commissioners' salespersons. Questions can be founded in (Appendix 1). Themes were divided into channels and customers, virtual environment versus face-to-face, sales process and buying journey, and last a couple of questions about AI in the sales environment.

Contacting channels and customer prospecting

The first part of the interviews had questions that were based on the contact channels and customer prospecting. Salespersons are having multiple contacts with potential customers so customer prospecting was also noted in the research. Most of the salespersons are receiving daily contacts on mobile or email from existing customers. Salespersons are also using the same channels to contact existing customers. It depends on the topic of the customer, which is the most suitable one to contact the customer.

"If you are going to meet a new customer or then a new product release, so face-to-face is always the best way to meet customers." – Person C

" The biggest advantage of the email is that it leaves always a mark on both sides and the receiver can decide when it is the right time to read and reply to it." – Person E

LinkedIn can be seen as a growing platform for contacting the customer and receiving contacts also from customers. Salespersons have got more potential leads from LinkedIn during the Covid-19 pandemic time. Overall contacts have been raised via LinkedIn.

"LinkedIn could have been earlier described only as a marketing tool. Nowadays we are receiving many quotations and meeting invites via LinkedIn direct mail." – Person A

Some of the customers are sending text messages or WhatsApp messages but they can easily mix up with personal things and do not leave an as good mark as emails do. It is also depending on the customer and how close the connection is with them. In some cases, WhatsApp or Teams messages can work as communication channels with the closest customers.

“Overall, it depends so much on the customer and the topic which is the most suitable way to communicate with them. Some of them prefer mobile calls and some face-to-face interaction.” – Person C

“I have also started to get new contact from our website chat. This is a new channel because the chat has existed only for a couple of months.” – Person F

When talking about customer prospecting and how to get more sales volume and new projects from existing customers LinkedIn was also mentioned as a big opportunity. Word of mouth and especially the general conversations in the meetings are good opportunities to hear of new potential projects and customers. One of the challenges in industrial automation is that often project is already planned and designed with specific components when it is published for the audience.

“Companies' websites, newsletters, and LinkedIn are important channels to get new leads. Active interaction with existing customers is also very important. Often in conversations, you can hear potential possibilities. Also before the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional fairs were a good opportunity to check out other companies' stands.” – Person D

Salespersons had a clear picture of how they are measuring if companies are suitable customers for the Phoenix Contact Oy. Basic research for the customer was made and then could be measured if it is a potential straight customer to Phoenix Contact Oy or maybe via some distributor or retailer. Every salesperson emphasized that collaboration with Phoenix Contact Oy distributors and retailers is very important so that company can serve every customer most suitably.

“Design offices must be mentioned also in this customer prospecting. Sometimes companies are not buying straight from our company, but they are for example designing the switchboards before the production starts at our customer. So the worth of the deal will be seen in the future.” – Person B

Virtual environment versus face-to-face

The second part of the interviews had questions that were based on the virtual environment versus face-to-face meetings. Probably the biggest surprise was that most of the salespersons would rather meet face-to-face customers than in a virtual environment. It is depending on the meeting agenda and what kind of relationship the salesperson is having with the customer.

“New and prospect I would like to meet first time face-to-face because it is easier to end up in a virtual environment for monologue and interaction will be less. If it is a familiar customer, a virtual environment works fine because we know each other and our habits and manners.” – Person B

“Face-to-face and in customer facilities is the best one. There you can straight see what products and solutions we can offer because often customers are showing their productions.” – Person D

There are also places for virtual meetings and it should be seen as a new tool. Easily people are thinking that they might be fed up with the virtual meetings but if comparing it to the time before the Covid-19 pandemic so all the meetings might be face-to-face. Nowadays it will give more opportunities to choose the right meeting method for the right situation.

“When there is a big audience, a virtual meeting can be easier to arrange. There can be a downside that attendees are not having cameras on it might be hard to see if the audience is reacting to anything. The agenda in a seminar kind of virtual meeting must be strict and not too long.” – Person C

“We have also tested hybrid model meetings that which one salesperson from Phoenix Contact Oy is at the customer’s facilities and another salesperson with some specific expertise joins the meeting via virtual environment for a short period of 20 to 30 minutes. This will make our work more efficient and reduce traveling.” – Person F

Face-to-face meetings' clear advantage is that showing product samples and demos are more effective and customer engaging than in a virtual environment. Customers are having real interaction with the salesperson in the face-to-face meeting and same time there can be small talk which can inform salespersons of new projects and possibilities. Disadvantages in face-to-face meetings cannot straight be mentioned, probably the time which is used to traveling and harder to get many people for the same meeting.

"Natural interaction with the customer is so much better in face-to-face meetings. Possibilities to show how products are working give an advantage for the salesperson." – Person A

"Customer interaction will give information about the new possibilities which could be offered to the customers. Same time customers are easily showing their production where our salespersons can get an idea which could be offered to them." – Person F

Virtual meetings' advantage is the easiness and time when compared to face-to-face meetings. Especially when there are many attendees, a virtual meeting is perfect for it. Virtual meetings are suitable when both parties have agreed on strict agenda to follow but the downside of it is often that then the small talk will leave away and new possibilities are not mentioned in the virtual meetings. A disadvantage is that engagement and interaction with customers are not strong, and salespersons are not getting so much out of the meeting when compared to face-to-face.

"When we have strict agenda in the meeting like pricing or replacing components, a virtual meeting works great. It will save both times." – Person B

"Virtual meetings work great for pricing and terms kind of meetings. It is very important to have a camera open in the meeting, when only having the voice, the meeting is kind an empty." – Person D

When thinking of the hybrid model of sales, it depends on what things are counted on the virtual side. If mobile calls and email are counted, then a hybrid model of 60-80% virtual and 20-40% can be in the future. When comparing only meetings, virtual versus face-to-face, in industrial automation it seems to be more like 80 % face-to-face and 20 % virtual.

"If talking of just meetings, I would say that 80 % are face-to-face and 20 % virtual. Of course, the number of virtual meetings will increase if comparing to the time before the Covid-19 pandemic." – Person A

"Face-to-face interaction is so important part of sales that I cannot agree with that 60/40. Virtual meetings have their role as a tool, but they will not take over face-to-face meetings." – Person B

When salespersons were talking about the virtual meetings, many of them thought that they have had fewer meetings in general because when the Covid-19 pandemic took over the world, it took a little bit of time before virtual meetings started. In the beginning, all the meetings were just canceled and

replaced with mobile calls and emails. When virtual meetings started to be a new normal, amount of meetings was close to the time before the pandemic. Some salespersons have had more meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic but most of them less. Salespersons thought that they have handled virtual meetings well and like that it is giving new tool for them.

“Virtual meetings have almost replaced the number of face-to-face meetings if comparing to the time before. Virtual meetings need to be planned better and stricter compared to face-to-face meetings. Same time virtual meetings have made contact easier.” – Person D

“I have had fewer virtual meetings than face-to-face meetings compared to the time before the Covid-19 pandemic. Probably the biggest issue was the uncertainty, when can we meet again in a normal environment?” – Person E

Sales process meets buying journey

The third part of the interviews had questions that were based on the sales process and how it responds to buying journey. Salespersons knew the commissioner's sales process but many of them thought that it is not so strict, and they have quite free hands to perform in the sales work. Salespersons noticed that the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenges in the world have affected the sales process is not responding at the moment to customer journey on a perfect level.

“I know the stages of our sales process and I think salespersons are getting enough support out of it to do their work. Follow-up should be on a better level, but the shortage of material is making it harder to do. Meaning that work hours are going to other tasks.” – Person B

“Our sales process is clear and as a salesperson, I see it as a flexible tool for us. Follow-up is an important part of our job and for example, we are asking for satisfaction from the customers.” – Person A

“The sales process is clear, but I like that we are getting a new CRM system which will lead us more to funnel type of selling. It will make the lead handling much easier than at the moment. It will make the whole sales process more transparent.” – Person D

Salespersons were asked how they think the sales process is meeting the customer journey. All the salespersons were on the same page that the company's sales process is responding to the customer journey. Some

differences at the beginning of the process like leads and end of the process follow-up.

“In a normal situation, our sales process meets very well customer journey. Unfortunately, at the moment there are logistical challenges and a shortage of materials, so salespersons' work hours are going to other things than selling.” – Person A

“Yes, our sales process meets on a general level our customers' journey. At the moment we need to focus on the quotation level already to lead times to serve our customers on a perfect level.” – Person C

“The sales process is responding well to customers' journey. Most of the work is the beginning of the sales process to turn leads into prospects.” – Person D

Salespersons were handling of topic that does their sales process needs any specific research before contacting customers and how they are convincing customers to choose Phoenix Contact Oy as their supplier. All the salespersons thought that the sales process is not too complex, and they are on a small signal eager to contact the potential customer. Salespersons thought that customers are valuing Phoenix Contact brand, logistics, support, service, and quality.

“Our sales process does not need any specific analyzes, we can easily contact potential customers. I think customers are valuing quality, logistics, customer service and support, and the brand. We are selling the whole Phoenix Contact brand to the customer. Customers can on an easy level contact anyone in the organization.” – Person C

“The sales process is not complex, of course, we need to check where the lead comes from but otherwise on a very small signal, we can contact potential customers. I think customers are trusting of us because we are making high-quality products that are branded perfectly. We have a large portfolio where we can find replacing models in these hard times. We have great customer service, our warehouse, and enough people in the field of sales.” – Person A

Sales technologies (AI)

The fourth and the last part of the interviews were handling sales technologies like how AI is helping in the sales processes. Salespersons did not have a clear picture that is Phoenix Contact Oy using AI in their processes, but at least not in the sales processes. Salespersons were interested in the topic and would like to see AI in the future.

“We are not using AI at the moment in the sales processes. Probably big organization will make the changes behind this kind of applications longer.” – Person A

“We are not using AI in sales processes. I think we should first implement it at the grass-root level like invoice and quotations handling. After that, it could be expanded to sales processes.” – Person E

Salespersons were also asked that have they heard of AI used by customers or collaborators. In sales work, AI does not see anywhere. In industrial automation and grass-root level tasks like invoice handling salespersons have heard of AI use.

“Some of the customers are using AI in their purchasing processes and I think it will raise in the future. It will save time from the grass-root level tasks. All the possibilities in data collection and expansion.” – Person F

“Some customers are using AI in their order confirmation and invoicing processes. But I haven’t heard yet of AI in the sales work.” – Person E

4.2 Buying committees opinions

This part of the results will be handling the answers of the commissioners’ existing customers. Questions can be founded in (Appendix 2). Themes were divided into channels and suppliers, virtual environment versus face-to-face, buying process and sales process, and last a couple of questions about AI in the sales environment.

Contacting channels and supplier prospecting

The first part of the interviews had questions that were based on the contacting channels and supplier prospecting. Most of the existing customers are receiving daily contacts on mobile or email. Customers are also using the same channels mobile and email to contact suppliers. It depends on the topic of the supplier, which is the most suitable one. Usage of email has grown because it always leaves marks on both sides.

“Because of the shortage of materials, we are having weekly calls/meetings with many suppliers. Also, emails are important parts of requests and price-related things.” – Person G

“Traditional email and mobile calls. Nowadays also receive messages on LinkedIn.” – Person J

“The biggest advantage of the email is that it leaves always a mark on both sides and it keeps the process transparent to both parties.” – Person I

“Emails advantage is that it leaves marks on both sides. Mobile calls advantage is when you need to get information fast.” – Person H

Social media channels like LinkedIn cannot be seen as important channels when looking for information about the suppliers. Suppliers’ websites and content on the websites can be seen as a major thing when choosing a supplier. For example, the website product comparison tool is important, when the supplier is having large product portfolio.

“Websites of the supplier can be seen as the most important tool. Also emailing straight to a supplier is a good way to see how they are acting and measure their service quality.” – Person G

When talking about supplier choices and how to get new suppliers and more contracts, websites and networks can be seen biggest opportunities. Word of mouth and general conversations in the meetings are good opportunities to hear about new potential suppliers and their advantages. One of the biggest challenges in industrial automation is that at the moment shortage of materials and components is so strong that customers need to evaluate new potential suppliers all the time.

“Earlier pricing and availability of the products were the key players when choosing suppliers. Unfortunately, the situation has gone so bad in some product segments that we can only check the availability of the supplier’s products. In some situations, end-customer can have already specs with are defining potential suppliers.” – Person I

“We need to evaluate potential suppliers and what kind of business opportunities they would give to us. Searching starts on the Internet and then trying to arrange a meeting with them.” – Person J

Customers had a clear picture of how they are measuring if companies are suitable suppliers for their companies. Basic research for the supplier was made and then could be measured if it is a strategically and economically potential

supplier for their company. Brand, availability, and pricing can be seen as key factors when choosing a supplier.

“The brand must be so strong that we do not have to convince the end customer afterward. We are interested in end-customers business, are their products going to stay in Finnish market? Potential for extra sales.” – Person G

“Availability is playing a crucial role in the world’s situation now. Especially if the end customer is on the maintenance site, they do not have time to wait.” – Person H

Virtual environment versus face-to-face

The second part of the interviews had questions that were based on the virtual environment versus face-to-face meetings. Probably the biggest surprise was that most of the customers would rather meet face-to-face their suppliers or end-customers than in a virtual environment. It is depending on the meeting agenda and what kind of relationship is built with the supplier.

“Face-to-face meetings are better because engaging is more effective from both sides. Probably “drinking coffee and changing greetings” kinda meeting in a face-to-face environment is gone.” – Person H

“Face-to-face is a better option. Virtual meetings are a good extra tool, but they cannot replace building relations with suppliers. Virtual meetings offer the possibility to have many people in the same room but same time often engagement level is bad, and many participants are cameras closed.” – Person G

“Nothing wins face-to-face meetings as cliché. Nowadays working schedule is so tight so I would recommend virtual meetings.” – Person J

“It depends on the situation, but if we are talking about contracts with suppliers, we should meet face-to-face, of course noticing the Covid-19 restrictions. If we are only talking about one agenda/subject, virtual meetings work fine.” – Person I

There are also places for virtual meetings and it should be seen as a new tool for arranging easier meetings with the potential suppliers. The problem with the virtual environment also from the customer perspective is that the engagement is not on enough level. Also in tricky negotiation situations, it is easier to negotiate with each other when you see direct reactions.

When thinking of the hybrid model of working, it depends on what things are counted on the virtual side. If mobile calls and email are counted, then a hybrid model of 60-80% virtual and 20-40% can be in the future. When comparing only meetings, virtual versus face-to-face, in industrial automation it seems to be more like 60 % face-to-face and 40 % virtual. There were differences in the answers.

“How are you counting this? If we are talking of just meetings, I would say that 80 % are face-to-face and 20 % virtual. If we count emails and mobile calls to this too, then I would say we are close to that 60/40.” – Person G

“I agree with that 60/40, and to be honest, I feel it can grow to 80/20 in the future. Same time it will make face-to-face meetings more valuable and special moment. But it will make it harder for us to meet people from the manufacturers/supplier’s head office or factory side.” – Person I

“Maybe in the close future, face-to-face meetings can have a bigger role when the Covid-19 restrictions start to ease, but in the big picture, I think the virtual environment has made a breakthrough during the last two years.” – Person H

When customers were talking about virtual meetings, many of them thought that they had the almost same number of meetings as before the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of them have had more meetings with end customers because of the troubles with deliveries and some of them have had fewer meetings with the suppliers. Customers thought that they have handled virtual meetings well and like that it is giving new opportunities and an easy way to contact suppliers.

“Inhouse meetings I have had quite the same number as before the pandemic. Supplier meetings have decreased but one big thing is the Covid-19 restrictions when there was no possibility to meet each other face-to-face.” – Person I

“There are more meetings than before the pandemic. Due to a shortage of materials, unfortunately, cannot meet all the end-customer requests regarding meetings.” – Person G

“There have been more meetings, but I think the reason is not the Covid-19 pandemic. The reason is the crisis with the material and component problem.” – Person J

Buying process meets sales process

The third part of the interviews had questions that were based on the buying process and how it meets suppliers' sales processes. Customers said that there

are different processes for different product or service areas, but the core of the process is always the same. Customers noticed that the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenges in the world have affected the buying process.

“Our buying process is kind of basic like your example provided. All the negotiations and transactions need the real need for a product or service.” – Person H

“It depends on the project. Some of the projects are started in our interest from the start, some projects can be end customers who have already decided on the components.” – Person G

“Our buying process is ISO certified and it demands transparency in the process. Contracting with suppliers guarantees the rules for each other.” – Person D

Customers were asked how they think suppliers' sales processes are meeting their buying journey. All the customers thought that at the moment sales process and buying journey are not on the same page because there are difficulties with order confirmations and product deliveries due to a shortage of materials. This thing is making a lot of extra work for the customers.

“Mainly suppliers' sales process is meeting our buying journey. The Covid-19 pandemic time has made it hard to trust order confirmation because they can be changed many times. Earlier this stage of the process was running smoothly but unfortunately nowadays not.” – Person H

“Unfortunately, I have to say that at the moment they are not on the same page. Logistics problems and shortage of materials and components have just gone in a worse direction.” – Person G

“Always processes are not meeting each other. With big suppliers when there are a lot of orders, processes must be on the same page. With small suppliers and smaller orders, it can be harder to have processes on the same page.” – Person I

Customers were handling of the topic that does their buying process needs any specific research before contacting suppliers and what they are valuing when they choose a supplier. All the customers thought that they have their processes to evaluate suppliers, but they can on an easy level contact suppliers. Customers thought that important factors for suppliers are brand, product portfolio, pricing, logistics, support and service, and quality.

“Product availability is a big factor at the moment due to the world's situation. Service quality is also a big factor when thinking of the supplier. We are ready to

pay for “extra service”. Good websites or webshop is a good advantage.” – Person H

“Our goal is always to make a contract with the supplier. The brand has to be strong and we are also interested in the size and strategy of the supplier. Is there potential for extra sales if products are staying in the Finnish market?– Person G

“Unfortunately, pricing is playing a key role even though many are not admitting it. One of the key factors is trust, meaning that the supplier is delivering products that we want and on the promised schedule.” – Person J

“We need to define what kind of supplier we are choosing? Key supplier or just replacing some products in these challenging times? The key is to find a supplier who are having a good strategy, product portfolio, and pricing and want to have a long-term partnership.” – Person I

Sales technologies (AI)

The fourth and the last part of the interviews were handling buying technologies like how AI is helping in the buying processes. Customers mentioned that in grassroots level processes some of them are using AI. Customers were interested in the topic and would like to see AI in the future.

“We are using slightly AI in some of our simpler processes. Like some of our orders are handled via EDI connection. Invoicing could have possibilities for AI but we are not using it at the moment.” – Person I

“Unfortunately, our company is not using AI in buying or sales processes. I would be interested to test them.” – Person G

“We do not have the help of AI like you described. We are going to have AI in the future in our grassroots-level processes.” – Person J

“Light AI is used to analyze traffic on our website or then newsletters click rates. Any new kind of technologies which you described is not used.” – Person H

Existing customers were also asked that have they heard of AI used by suppliers or collaborators. They have not met AI in sales or buying decision processes. In industrial automation and grass-root level tasks like invoice handling, customers have heard of AI use.

“Some companies are using AI in their invoicing processes, and I think it will raise in the future.” – Person I

“Unfortunately, I have not met any examples of new technologies in suppliers or collaborators.” – Person H

4.3 Main findings of the interviews

The main findings of this study can be divided into the same areas as the interview parts. Themes were contacting channels and prospecting, virtual environment versus face-to-face, sales process meets buying journey, and sales technologies (AI).

Contacting channels and prospecting

Figure 3 shows which are the most important channels for contacting each other from salespersons and buying sides' perspectives:

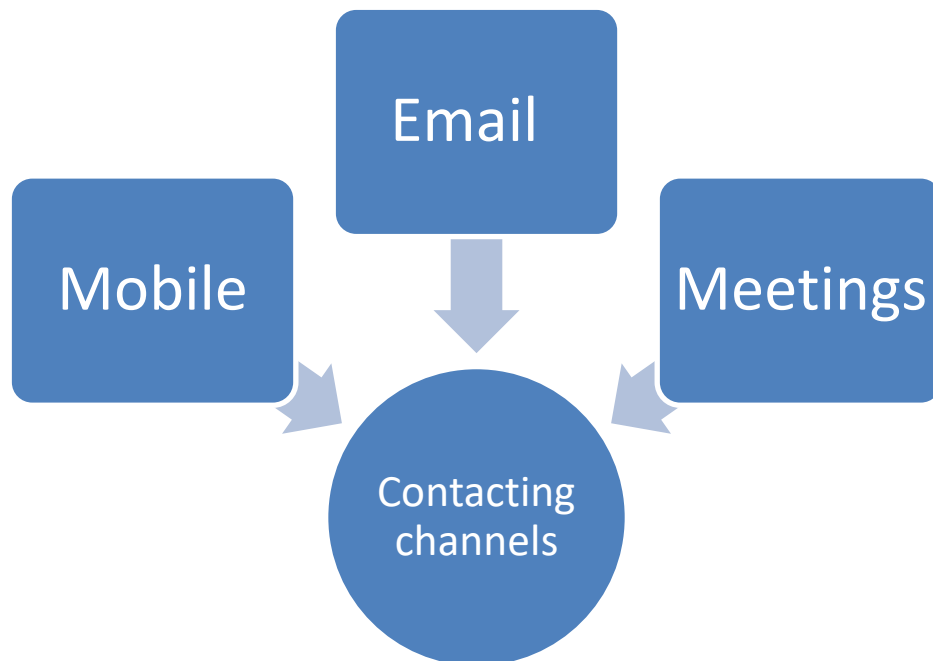


Figure 3: Most important contacting channels

Email and mobile were the most important channels when contacting customers or suppliers. Especially email was seen as a powerful tool because respondents can read messages when it is the best suitable time and then reply to the sender. Mobile was seen helpful when there are urgent cases and answers are needed fast. Many of the interviewees also mentioned meetings as a good way to have contact with each other.

Both target groups were asked which are the most useful channels for prospecting. Figure 4 will show the most important channels both salespersons and customers were using:

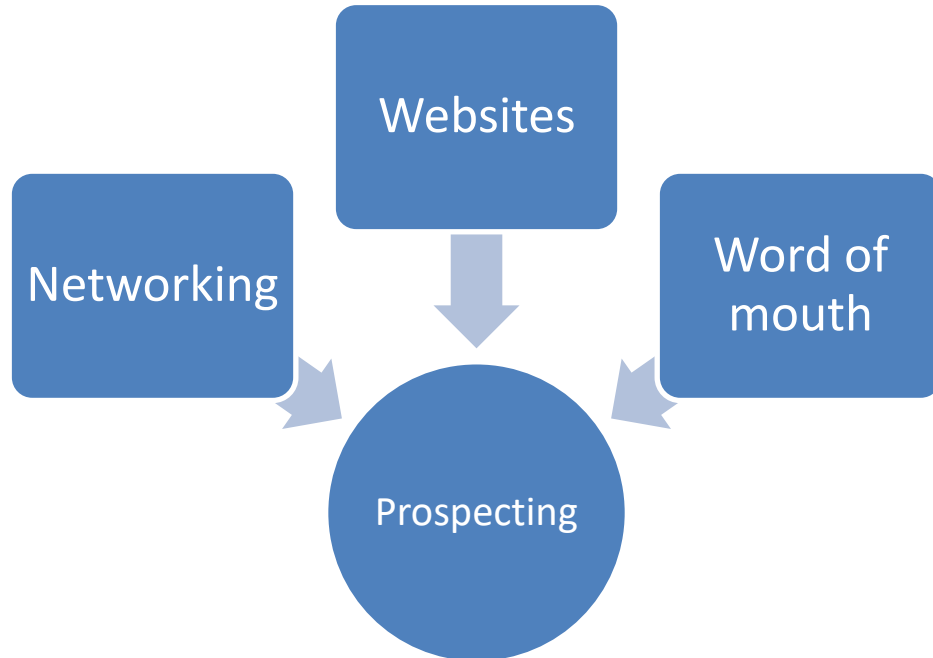


Figure 4: Useful methods for prospecting

Websites were a useful method for both target groups. Websites should be made clear when customers are looking for a supplier. Websites will show for salesperson's potential of the company and what kind of project could be made in the future. Salespersons saw LinkedIn more as a good tool for prospecting, customers saw it more like a newsfeed at the moment. Word of mouth cannot be underestimated never because all kinds of information can be changed in meetings and fairs.

Virtual environment versus face-to-face

One surprising results of the interviews were that most of the interviewees would like to meet face-to-face than in a virtual environment. Figure 5 shows the meeting hierarchy:

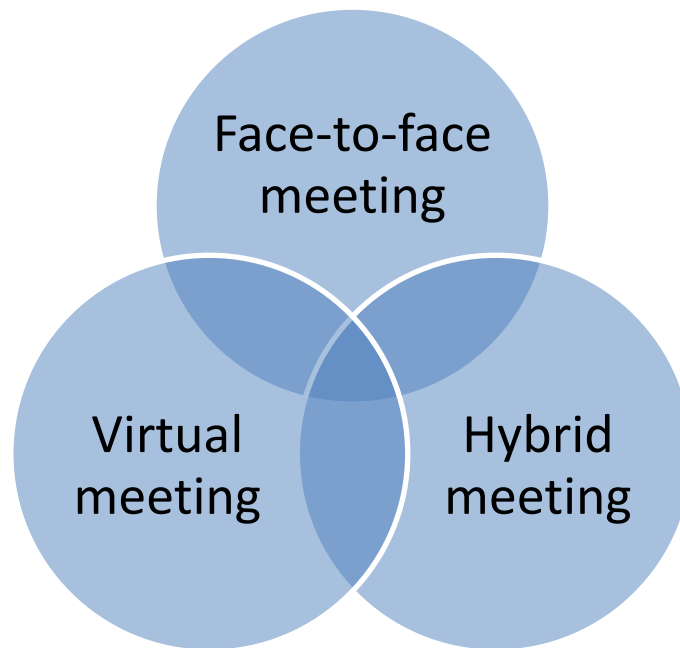


Figure 5: Types of meetings

Face-to-face meetings were highly wanted from both sides of the target groups. Probably one reason can be the long period with the Covid-19 restrictions and just having virtual meetings. The face-to-face meeting was seen as good for important topics and agendas like contracts or new product releases. The virtual meeting was seen as suitable when there is a strict agenda or one-deal kind of meeting. Commissioner's all salespersons mentioned a hybrid meeting model where one salesperson is at the customer's facilities and another salesperson joins the meeting via a virtual channel to give support with some expertise to negotiations. This was seen as a useful tool and warmly welcome to be used also in the future.

Figure 6 describes thoughts on the hybrid sales model:

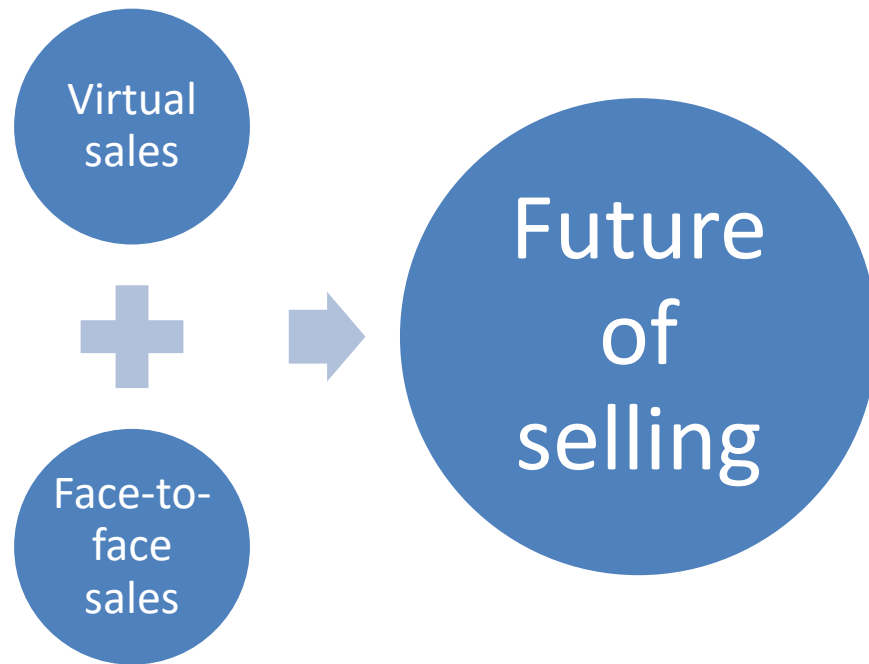


Figure 6: Future of sales interactions

How the future of sales interactions will be formulated was a tricky question for the interviewees because it is quite hard to estimate. If mobile and email are counted to virtual sales, so then 60/40 will happen and or even more on the virtual side like 80%. If only talking of the sales meetings, then salespersons thought that even 80 % will happen face-to-face and only 20% in a virtual environment. The customer side saw that virtual meetings are going to increase and the old kind of drinking coffee and chatting how it is going kind of meetings face-to-face is going to decrease.

Sales process meets buying journey

Figure 7 shows how the sales process and buying journey were seen from both sides:

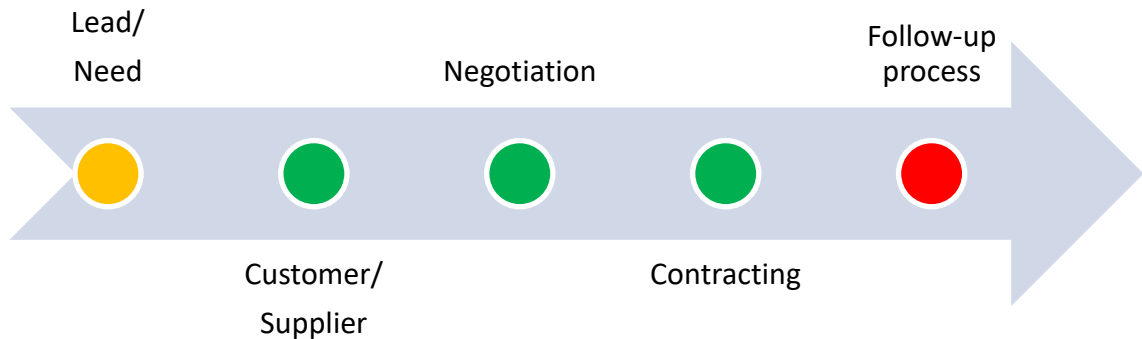


Figure 7: Sales and buying processes meeting at the moment

Salespersons thought that the sales process is clear in the commissioner, and it is on the same page with customers buying journey. Salespersons noticed that there are a little few challenges with the beginning of the process in lead generation and handling and they also noticed logistical problems and shortage of materials which affect the end of the process. Customers noticed that the example of buying process fits them but there can be differences in the buying journey depending on the project and end customer. Customers also noticed that unfortunately at the moment there is a lot of extra work in the buying process because of the shortage of materials, many deliveries are delayed, and it is hard to get real lead times in these challenging times.

Figure 8 shows what kind of things customers are valuing from the supplier and what was salespersons thought of the commissioner's strengths:



Figure 8: Valuable things in successful supplier

There were many valuable things for the successful supplier. The supplier does need to be great on many different factors to be successful like Figure 9 provides. Unfortunately, at the moment success is tested by many suppliers because the shortage of materials and components has led to a situation where customers are looking for a new supplier based on the availability of the products.

Sales technologies (AI)

Even though AI is generally used in the industrial automation processes, it was a little bit surprise that how few use it in sales or buying processes. Figure 9 shows the facts of the AI section:

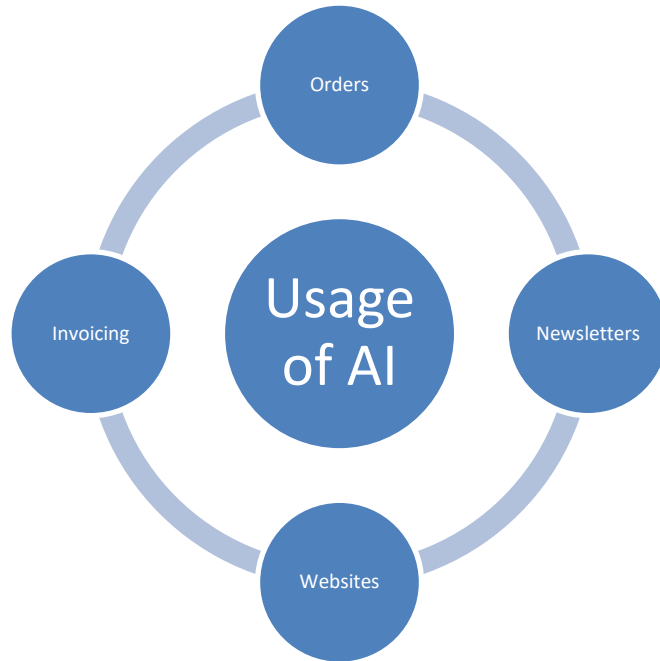


Figure 9: Usage of AI

All of the interviewees were interested in the sales technology's questions, but they have not heard of the usage of the newest technologies in sales or buying processes. Interviewees asked the interviewer more about the topic and were interested in it. Some of the interviewees noticed that their company is using, or they have heard that in grass-root level tasks like orders, invoicing and website traffic there are used AI. Probably usage of AI, in grass-root level tasks, should raise generally more that it would be integrated into advanced sales or buying technologies.

4.4 Reliability of the research

The thesis writer should think of the reliability already in the planning phase of the thesis to get the research problem and questions made right. If the thesis writer is not making the planning and research phase enough good, it can have a harmless effect on the reliability and validity of the research results. The reliability of the thesis work should be always checked after the research is made. (Kananen, 2019, 30-32.)

The research problem and method should be planned in a way that research results will be reliable and valid. Research starts from the research problem and validity determines if the research handles the right methods and subjects. There must be enough of the collected data that conclusions can be made of it. Reliability means that can research answers and analyzes be trusted, if the same research would be repeated, would the answers be the same. (Kananen, 2019, 30-32.)

The qualitative method can use saturation to confirm the research. Saturation means that interviews are made with different interviewees so many times that new data are not available, meaning that the answers of the interviewees start to repeat themselves. Interviewing should be made with different target groups to get data from different perspectives. (Kananen, 2019, 32-34.)

This thesis work was based on the need of the commissioner company and the writer's interest in this topic. The writer is working at the commissioner company in a B2B sales environment and his interest in this topic has grown during his studies. The qualitative method was chosen for this research to get a deeper knowledge of this phenomenon from two different perspectives: Commissioner's salespersons and existing customers. Theoretical background research made the process clearer to define the research problem and the interviews gave profitable data for the research questions.

Interviews of this research gave data to analyze the research problem and provide improvements for the commissioner's sales work after the pandemic. Existing customer interviews were based on all their experiences, not just interactions with the commissioner company. This fact can be seen as adding more reliability to this research.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aimed to answer how B2B sales should be done in the case company Phoenix Contact Oy in the future. The topic was narrowed to the time after the Covid-19 pandemic in which virtual environments and face-to-face meetings were compared to each other. The sales process was evaluated and same time comparing it to buying journey of existing customers. The goal of the thesis was achieved by starting with the literature research and finalizing the study with the interviews of six salespersons of the commissioner and four existing customers of the commissioner. The themes of the interviews were contacting channels and prospecting, virtual environment versus face-to-face, sales process meets buying journey, and sales technologies (AI).

5.1 B2B Sales work after the Covid-19 pandemic

B2B sales work have had massive changes before the Covid-19 pandemic but the Covid-19 pandemic has boosted the changes even more. Probably the biggest change of the Covid-19 pandemic was in the sales interactions where old face-to-face meetings changed to a virtual environment. Virtual meetings did not completely replace face-to-face meetings but there were also phone calls and emails instead of face-to-face meetings. The Covid-19 pandemic also affected challenges for the sales process and how it meets the buying journey of the customers. There have been troubles with the logistics and shortage of raw materials and components.

When thinking of a new direction of B2B sales, theory section 2.1 noticed the Alamäki et al. (2021) fact that digital transformation of the sales is going to be huge, and selling will transform from selling products or services to value-based selling. Interviewees have noticed the digital transformation during the last year, even though it is not so strong in the industrial automation, it should be noticed in the future because of the modern buyers who are aware of the digital opportunities. Sales transformation can be agreed upon because customers are

demanding better service and real value for their purchases. According to Shanks (2016) social selling practices in theory section 2.1, this can be agreed that social selling is going to be an important part of the future. Many of the interviewees mentioned that contacts via LinkedIn have grown during the last months.

In theory section 2.2, according to Blount (2020), face-to-face selling is not coming to end because engagement is stronger and building trust easier. If thinking about the answers of interviewees, this thing can be strongly agreed. Especially when new people are meeting each other, or important agendas and cases are on the table in those situations face-to-face meetings are necessary. The key thing in the meeting is to find the most suitable way for all attendees.

Like in the theory section 2.3, according to Blount (2020), virtual selling is not only virtual meetings via Teams or Zoom, every contact like phone calls or emails can be counted as virtual selling. This research should have defined more clearer which are counted as virtual selling and which as traditional sales work. This thing can be the key factor that changes the hybrid model to be real in the future and could have been better predictions in this research. Kvedare et al. (2021) suggested the 60/40 hybrid sales model which can be close when all the virtual selling is counted to the interactions. If only meetings are counted, then it would be probably closer to a 50/50 situation in the future when counting all the answers. The commissioner's salespersons noticed the hybrid model in meetings as a very useful and powerful method where one salesperson is at the customer and the other joins with a virtual channel. It should be in active use at the commissioner after the pandemic.

Figure 10 shows what can be estimated of the B2B sales based on the theory research and interviews:

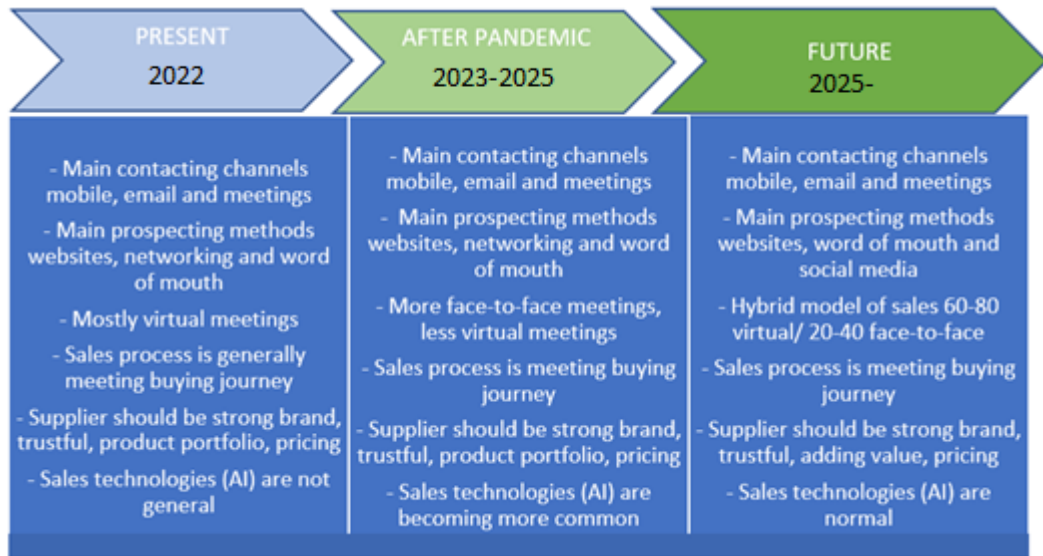


Figure 10: B2B sales future

B2B sales are at the moment in the middle of changes. Figure 10 is based on the Covid-19 situation at the moment, but it can change in the future. There are still some Covid-19 restrictions, even though the government has removed them, many companies are having their own stronger policies. This can lead to a situation where after they are removed, people are more eager to meet again in face-to-face meetings. Probably in the future, the hybrid sales model will be true. Key findings are to be active towards customers and try to give them the best service on the market. The supplier should be a strong brand, trustworthy, have good pricing, and have a product portfolio that answers to customers' needs. The sales process is having at the moment problems with logistical and shortage of materials, but it makes it more clear that in other areas, the supplier needs to offer the best service for the customers to keep them satisfied.

Contacting channels would probably be the same after the Covid-19 pandemic. In the commissioner's industry, social media has not been so popular but the interviews already proved that LinkedIn is already growing as contacting channel so probably in the future it will important channel also in leveraging content. AI cannot be seen as general at the moment but in the future usage of AI should increase at least in the grassroots level tasks. Probably AI will be

used in the advanced sales processes when it is first implemented for the simpler tasks.

5.2 Importance of the B2B buying journey

B2B buying journey is playing important role in the modern B2B sales work. Customers are more demanding, and they want to get the real value for their business. At the moment unfortunate crisis with a shortage of materials and components is making time for all the suppliers hard. Unexpected times can be learnable lessons for the suppliers in the future.

Like in theory section 2.4, according to Cheverton et al. (2011) basic buying process of companies is relatively simple, and it is based on the need of the customer. Many interviewees agreed with the buying process and noticed that suppliers' sales process is on a general level meeting it good. At the moment there is an unfortunate crisis with raw materials and components so it affected the end of the process and creates a lot of extra work for the customers.

In theory section 2.4, Lemon et al. (2016) state that customer experience should be at the perfect level to answer for the service level buyers are demanding. This has changed the field of sales in the direction that salespersons need to be aware of serving customers in multiple ways and channels to keep them satisfied. According to Kaski et al. (2017), customers are demanding better knowledge and insights from the salespersons. Salespersons should put their highest effort into going to meet the customers' needs and their journey.

Figure 11 shows how the commissioner is performing at the moment if we are taking notice of the crisis which is ongoing. Otherwise, the end of the process would be better. Results are based on theory research and interviews.

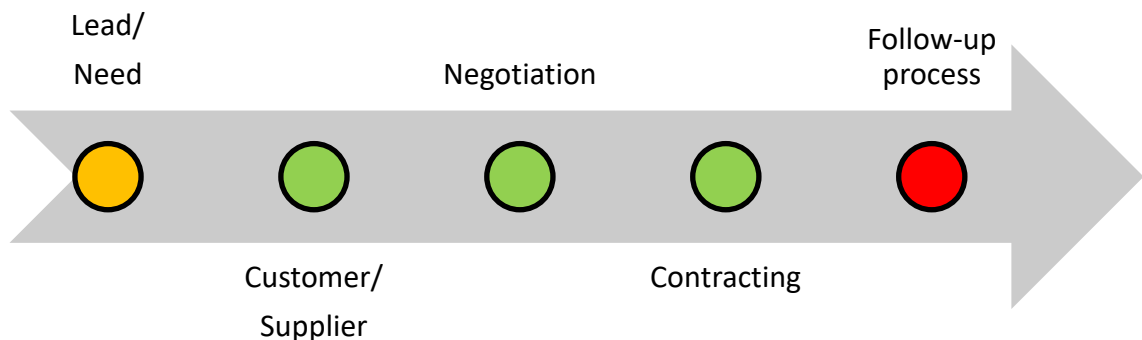


Figure 11: How sales process meets buying journey at the moment

As Figure 11 points out, generally the process is working at the commissioner. At the moment, problems are at the beginning of the process and the end. The beginning of the process could be more effective with lead handling and there is going to be changed when one interviewee noticed that the upcoming CRM system will help the beginning of the process to be more transparent and the whole sales process like a funnel. The follow-up process is at the moment hard for every supplier because the world's situation is bad. That is the reason why other parts of the process have to be perfect like they at the moment are.

5.3 Further research ideas of this topic

This topic could be researched with new angles and research methods. Probably the first idea would be to do quantitative or mixed methods research to get a bigger number of answers to generalize this study's key points. Quantitative research could be made for example commissioner salespersons in the Nordic countries compared to customers.

Another topic or angle for the new research could be made of what kind of skills are needed for the future's B2B salesperson. This study topic was more about handling the environment, methods, and changes in them during the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be interesting to see what skills would be valuable for a successful B2B salesperson in the future.

Virtual sales and AI could be also researched on the new research. There are possibilities in virtual sales and how AI will help sales work in the future. Virtual sales and AI are still relatively new things but in the future their usage would probably grow in the sales work. All the time, new technologies are arising to help salespersons to be better in their sales work.

5.4 Managerial implications

Overall it can be stated by the theoretical research and the interviewees that the commissioner is on right track with their actions and the sales process. The commissioner is having a strong position in the market with key values like brand, trustful, and a large product portfolio. The commissioner is managing well the contacting channels and updating them actively to keep them updated. There are challenges regarding the beginning and the end of the sales process (Figure 11) but as mentioned so the beginning will be corrected with the CRM system update and the end is affecting a lot the situation with the shortage of raw materials and components. End of the process with the world's bad situation of raw materials and components cannot be unfortunately affected so much by the subsidiary and it is so broad problem that is affecting many industries at the moment. The positive side is that the commissioner is having a large product portfolio so substitutive products can be offered to their customers.

The commissioner should take note of the situation after the pandemic (Figure 10) to keep doing the active contact with the customers and find out which are the suitable ways after the Covid-19 pandemic to contact the certain customer. Some of the customers can rather meet in a virtual environment and the

commissioner should adapt that they respond to all customers' needs. There can be changes when the Covid-19 pandemic is completely over and people are eager to meet each other again without the Covid-19 restrictions and company regulations.

Social selling is slowly adapting its way to industrial automation. Regarding the interviews contacting via LinkedIn has raised a lot during the year 2022. Based on this and related questions from the interviewees, it would be highly recommended to have more effort on social media channels. Especially LinkedIn which can be seen as a growing platform. Salespersons should post more pictures and videos to attract customers and potential customers' attention. More and more new potential customers will be on social media. There can be start-ups or then the new generation of modern buyers who will make their supplier choosing research based on social media presence.

Advanced sales technologies by AI cannot be seen actual at the moment. They are relatively new things that the market should probably have a better understanding of the advantages of the newest technologies to find out which would be the most beneficial one for the commissioner. It should be also considered how visible the usage of AI should be to customers because that can be one reason why people have not seen AI in use when thinking in general. AI is recommended for implementation in the grassroots level tasks but in the advanced sales work, it would probably be in the longer future.

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Cover letter 1

Cover letter for commissioner's salespersons

Dear recipient,

I am studying in Turku University of Applied Sciences for MBA in Sales Management. Studies are in the last phase, and I would like to interview Phoenix Contact Oy salespersons for my master thesis.

More information of the thesis:

I am doing master thesis of B2B sales work and how it is seen after the Covid-19 pandemic. Last two years have modified our working environment and methods completely, for example with virtual meetings, new platforms and channels or for some people the job description has changed.

I would like to ask you to participate for this interview which researches how B2B salespersons and existing customers sees the time after Covid-19 pandemic in the B2B environment. B2B salespersons opinions are important part of this research so I would appreciate your opinions for this research.

Interviews are on the following dates 11-25.04.2022. Interview will be approximately 20 to 30 minutes and answers will be handled anonymous. Interview will be on Microsoft Teams, and it will be recorded for this thesis work. After thesis process is done, recording will be deleted from the thesis writer.

Interview questions as attachment.

I already want to thank you for the effort and consideration for this interview.

Thank you.

Best regards

Max Nakari
Turku University of Applied Sciences

Interview questions 1

Interview questions for commissioner's salespersons

1. What is your role and responsibilities in your company?
2. Which channels are you receiving contacts from the customers?
3. Which channels are you preferring when you contact customers?
4. Which channels are you looking for information of the customers and their upcoming projects? Where do you find out more leads/projects?
5. What kind of criterion do you have when evaluating potential customers?
6. The Covid-19 pandemic have ended up us to keep almost every meeting in virtual environment. Now when the Covid-19 restrictions start to loosen, which one you would prefer: face-to-face meeting or virtual meeting? Why?
7. Face-to-face meetings advantages and disadvantages?
8. Virtual meetings advantages and disadvantages?
9. In what kind of environment do you see future's meetings will happen? Some research predicts 60/40 so called hybrid model. How do you see it?
10. Do you have had totally more meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic?
11. How do you feel your performing in the virtual meetings?
12. What kind of sales process do your company have? Do you know stages of it, and do you get help of it to perform good in the sales work?
13. Does your sales process meet customers' buying processes? Meaning that processes are on the same page to get good interactions in right situations.
14. What kind of background research your sales process demands of the potential customers before contacting them? Where are you looking for the customer information?
15. Which are the most valuable factors you use when you are convincing customer to choose your company as supplier? What factors you think customers are valuing?
16. New technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) have been used in sales processes, analyzing virtual meeting gestures and voice tones or to sort customers. Does your company use AI in any processes?
17. Have you heard that any companies use AI in their processes? If yes, could you describe how?

Cover letter 2

Cover letter for existing customers

Dear recipient,

I am working at Phoenix Contact Oy in Contact Center, and I am studying same time in Turku University of Applied Sciences for MBA in Sales Management. Studies are in the last phase, and I would like to interview existing customers of Phoenix Contact Oy for my master thesis.

More information of the thesis:

I am doing master thesis of B2B sales work and how it is seen after the Covid-19 pandemic. Last two years have modified our working environment and methods completely, for example with virtual meetings, new platforms and channels or for some people the job description has changed.

I would like to ask you to participate for this interview which researches how B2B salespersons and existing customers sees the time after Covid-19 pandemic in the B2B environment. Existing customers opinions are important part of this research so I would appreciate your opinions for this research.

Interviews are on the following dates 19-29.04.2022. Interview will be approximately 20 to 30 minutes and answers will be handled anonymous. Interview will be on Microsoft Teams, and it will be recorded for this thesis work. After thesis process is done, recording will be deleted from the thesis writer.

Interview questions as attachment.

I already want to thank you for the effort and consideration for this interview.

Thank you.

Best regards

Max Nakari
Turku University of Applied Sciences

Interview questions 2

Interview questions for existing customers

1. What is your role and responsibilities in your company?
2. Which channels are you receiving contacts from the salespersons/suppliers?
3. Which channels are you preferring when you contact salespersons/suppliers?
4. Which channels are you looking for information of the suppliers and their products/services?
5. Based on the channel research, how you choose specific supplier?
6. The Covid-19 pandemic have ended up us to keep almost every meeting in virtual environment. Now when the Covid-19 restrictions start to loosen, which one you would prefer: face-to-face meeting or virtual meeting? Why?
7. In what kind of environment do you see future's meetings will happen? Some research predicts 60/40 so called hybrid model. How do you see it?
8. Do you have had totally more meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic?
9. How do you feel your performing in the virtual meetings?
10. What kind of buying process do you have in your company?
Is it divided in normal phases like:
Specify -> Source -> Negotiate -> Contract -> Follow-up?
11. Do suppliers' sales processes meet your needs? Meaning that are sales process meeting you buying process?
12. What kind of background research your buying process demands of the potential suppliers before contacting them? Where are you looking for the supplier information?
13. Which are the most valuable factors and criterion when you are choosing new supplier?
14. Which factors do you think are the most valuable of the existing suppliers?
15. New technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) have been used in buying processes, analyzing virtual meeting gestures and voice tones or to sort suppliers. Does your company use AI in any processes?
16. Have you heard that any companies use AI in their processes? If yes, could you describe how?