From sales exaptation to digital transformation: Value creation from remote selling☆

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation of sales practices was accelerated during the pandemic as it necessitated a rapid shift to remote selling for many organizations. However, traditional sales' reliance on onsite visits, collaborative sales team meetings, and in-person interactions with customers have raised questions on the viability of remote selling in the B2B sales context. This qualitative study explores how sales organizations rapidly responded to these disruptions to create value for remote buyers. Through in-depth interviews with sales managers engaged in remote selling, we reveal new value creation mechanisms via digital channels, enhancing both sales efficiency and customer relationships, the realization of which is followed by organizations' deliberate efforts to assimilate remote selling. We argue this rapid shift can be better understood through evolutionary concepts of exaptation and subsequent adaptation, providing insights into organizational response to radical environmental changes. More specifically, we propose a processual framework where crisis-induced salesforce exaptation prompts organizations to accelerate technology adoption and capability development, which in turn catalyzes organizational changes to propel businesses into digital transformation trajectories. Our research contributes to the literature on crisis-driven innovation and exaptation theory for analyzing rapid transformations. We offer practical insights to address the challenges of incorporating digital technologies into sales structures.

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has substantially changed the way sales practices are performed. The purpose of digitalizing sales is to simplify the selling process by implementing cutting-edge technology and automation during the stages of the sales cycle (Singh et al., 2019). Some key changes companies sought to make included adopting digital showrooms for products and services, providing e-commerce training to salespeople, and disseminating information to customers via webinars (Cortez and Johnston, 2020). Globally, approximately 90 % of organizations are currently going through some form of digital transformation (McKinsey and Company, 2024). In the sales literature, the adoption of new technologies has consistently been portrayed as a significant challenge (e.g., Spreer and Rauschnabel, 2016). Digital transformation, in particular, is often described as demanding for sales professionals, increasing both their stress levels and overall workload (Guenzi and

Nijssen, 2021). Thus, there was inertia towards full adoption of digital transformation pre-pandemic as business-to-business (B2B) sales still relied heavily on in-person meetings for relationship building, due to the perception that face-to-face interactions are more impactful for sales (Hunter and Perreault Jr, 2007; Illing, 2022; Kirkman et al., 2004).

Confronted with the survival pressure induced by the pandemic, organizations were forced to implement sales continuity initiatives leveraging digital technologies (HBRAS, 2021). For instance, stages of the sales process, such as prospecting, nurturing, negotiating, and closing, involve routine visits to clients to develop and nurture ongoing buyer-seller relationships. However, these activities were minimized or completely prohibited because of periodic lockdowns and social distancing rules. Resultantly, companies conducted sales through remote channels.

However, digitalizing sales is challenging, as it involves "complex technology, human and organizational challenges" (Zoltners et al.,

2021). Nonetheless, both academics and practitioners see merit in this involuntary yet inevitable digital transformation. The unanticipated disruption accelerated both the adoption of technologies and the development of complementary capabilities. The crisis potentially opened new trajectories for organizations to undergo transformative changes, revising their value propositions by repurposing existing resources in innovative ways (Codini et al., 2023).

One of the main consequences of digital transformation is an increase in remote selling. Remote selling processes do not require salespeople and clients to be in the same physical space, thus cutting salespeople's need to travel and engage in regular client visits (Rangarajan et al., 2022). Remote selling, which started as a response to the crisis, has become a mainstream strategy in many sales organizations (Donchack et al., 2022; Good et al., 2022; Gavin et al., 2020). Remote selling became popular for the following two reasons. First, as a part of the digital transformation initiative, companies are investing in technologies facilitating remote selling. For example, purchasing video conferencing software licenses and making them available to sales employees. Second, the growing digital literacy among buyers, means they are more open to accessing online resources (such as the company's social media platforms). This has helped companies overcome some of the resistance traditionally associated with remote selling (Ringy, 2023).

However, there is a scarcity of evidence suggesting whether salespeople can sustain value creation for their clients through remote selling. Initial surveys conducted by consulting firms such as McKinsey are mostly inconclusive about remote selling as they reported the growing trends of remote selling without discussing how effective it is (Badges-Amat et al., 2020; Diebner et al., 2020), and to this date, sales managers are struggling to achieve the right balance of remote selling (Ahearne et al., 2025). Thus, it remains unclear if focusing on self-service channels and digital interactions can substitute traditional high-touch, in-person sales interactions, and there is a need for research that explores the impact of digital transformation on sales, such as remote selling, beyond the adoption of new technology (Goel et al., 2025). To comprehend the paradigm shift from traditional to remote selling, it is crucial to explore how remote selling affects sales value creation and overall value proposition. While previous sales research primarily focused on the role of hybrid sales team, salespeople's

Table 1
Relevant literature.

Citations	Focus of the Study	Context and Method	Key Findings	Key Concepts
Schaarschmidt et al. (2022)	Authors develop a scale to measure a firm's capability to engage in a hybrid offering	B2B Survey with industrial managers, decision makers, and professionals	Conceptualized and operationalized a hybrid offering sales capabilities (HOSC)	Hybrid Selling
Habel et al. (2021)	Authors develop a theoretical framework on key determinants of salespeople's promotion of e-commerce channels	B2B and B2C Survey with salespeople and customers, and objective company data	Salespeople who are more relationally oriented are less likely to promote e-commerce channels to their customers. A customer's positive attitude towards e-commerce weakens this effect, while a competitor's personal selling focus strengthens it	Salespeople's traits for online selling
Thaichon et al. (2018)	Authors examine the impact of internet technology on the evolution of sales organizations and identify key components for a hybrid sales structure	B2B and B2C Theoretical, Summarized previous findings	Three identified trends (1) it is easier to sell without the need for face-to-face meetings, (2) buyers feel comfortable communicating with salespeople online, (3) organizations prefer the sales team to control costs	Trends in online selling
Ramos et al. (2023)	Authors examine how inside (IS), and outside sales structure affect customers' value creation	B2B Single firm Modeling on the Firm's existing data	IS increases value creation when used discreetly, but using IS with OS decreases salesperson performance	The difference between inside and hybrid sales in value creation
Good et al. (2022)	Authors examine the transformation of the sales organization during the pandemic	B2B and B2C Theoretical	Personal Selling and Sales Management has transformed in six key areas during the pandemic: sales strategy, sales force design, technology (Virtual Selling, AI), leadership, salesperson wellness, and customer engagement	Focus on technology during sales transformation
Rangarajan et al. (2022)	Authors examine how WFH (work from home) affects salespeople and organizations	B2B Interview and Survey	Stressors associated with Work from Home and job insecurity have a significant effect on salespeople's anxiety	Stressors of Work from Home
Lashitew (2023)	The author examines the role of CEO experience and gender in intention to adopt and utilize e-commerce and remote working technology among SMEs	B2B Modeling on Existing Data	The CEO's gender and experience shape attitude and intention towards the introduction of digital technology in SMEs during the crisis, such as women CEO are less likely to introduce digital and remote working technology than men CEO. Besides, overall CEO experience has a U-shaped curve with the intention to adopt digital technologies	Role of gender and experience in the adoption of e-commerce and remote working
de Lucas Ancillo et al. (2023)	Authors examine the evolution of the workplace during COVID-19 and the permanent changes in workplace settings caused by the pandemic	B2B Literature Review and systematic analysis	Recognized specific categories required for workplace engagement, such as for remote and hybrid work	Permanent changes in work workplace caused by remote and hybrid working
Gavin et al. (2020)	The authors discussed how COVID-19 changed buyer and seller interactions	B2B Survey	Identified trends for effective buyer-seller interactions	Buyer-Seller Interactions
Gillani et al. (2024)	Authors explored different factors enabling successful digital transformation in organizations	Case Study	Technology, Data, Process, human capital, and organization structure as key enablers of DT	Digital Transformation
This Paper	**Authors explored how remote selling creates value in buyer-seller relationships**	**B2B Interview**	**Authors found value creation themes within competence and relational dimensions of value creation and proposed an emerging framework based on concepts of exaptation and adaptation**	**Remote Selling**

personality and gender while communicating through digital channels, and stressors of selling from a home environment (Schaarschmidt et al., 2022; Habel et al., 2021; Lashitew, 2023; Rangarajan et al., 2022; see Table 1 for list of relevant literature), no research, in best of our knowledge, there is a scarcity of research focusing on role of remote selling in B2B relationships.

Similarly, existing research on value creation has focused either on e-commerce channels (including social media) or digital technologies as a source of value creation without exploring the holistic view on remote selling (Cheng et al., 2023; Alnakhli et al., 2021; Mancuso et al., 2023). We combine these two streams of research by exploring how remote selling creates value in the buyer-seller relationship.

We conducted a comprehensive qualitative study that investigated how companies responded to the crisis in their sales practices and the implications of such changes in their digital transformation process. Through in-depth interviews with twenty-three senior managers from B2B sales, we explored new value creation channels associated with remote selling, building on a framework consisting of both competence and relational perspectives (Blocker et al., 2012). In doing so, we identified mechanisms through which remote selling can enhance sales competence and foster buyer-seller relationships. We then discovered that the rapid shift to remote selling propelled organizations to accelerate digital transformation and the development of complementary capabilities. More importantly, this has opened new trajectories for sales-oriented organizations to undergo transformative changes, reconsidering their value propositions through new value creation channels. Drawing from theoretical perspectives of organizational change, we argue that this transformation can be understood and conceptualized as an evolutionary process (Van De Ven and Poole, 1995), particularly highlighting the concept of exaptation.

As the pandemic created a radical survival pressure upon organizations, which can be viewed as a form of environmental selection to which organizations are forced to respond. This calls for struggling candidate firms to utilize unplanned discoveries to remain fit. In contrast to deliberate *adaptation,* which requires active planning and directed effort, the logic of *exaptation* entails a reactive, and often rapid redeployment of existing resources and functions to withstand environmental shocks (Andriani and Cattani, 2016; Gould and Vrba, 1982). This process generates sufficient variation by producing new functions that allow firms to survive, sometimes perchance to thrive, in unfamiliar environments (Van De Ven and Poole, 1995). For instance, video conferencing tools, once used only for occasional remote communication, were unintendedly repurposed (i.e., exapted) during the pandemic for regular work meetings, sales pitches, and a variety of customer-facing interactions.

Our findings illustrate how organizational salesforces underwent exaptative processes through crisis-induced remote selling, which was subsequently followed by adaptive actions to deliberately institutionalize the change. Through assimilative adaptations such as investing in digital infrastructure, developing skills and capabilities, and setting up new working policies, the salesforce then became a major driver of accelerated digital transformation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizing remote working and remote selling

Remote working is defined as performing organizational work outside the normal organizational confines of space and time (Klopotek, 2017; Olson, 1983). Terms such as remote working, work-from-home, or teleworking are often used interchangeably because they focus on the location of work that is typically outside the confines of an organization (Sullivan, 2012; Kurkus-Rozowska and Konarska, 2002). Organizations are increasingly focusing on remote working, primarily to help their employees maintain work-life balance (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). However, the impact of remote working on employees is mixed,

highlighting both positive and negative effects on attitudinal, behavioural, cognitive, and well-being outcomes (Ferdous et al., 2025). On one hand, remote working is positively associated with employee productivity (Allen et al., 2015; Martin and MacDonnell, 2012), employee retention (Moen et al., 2011), job satisfaction (Kröll et al., 2017; Possenriede et al., 2016), organizational commitment (Martin and MacDonnell, 2012), low work-family conflict and high relationship quality with supervisors and co-workers (Golden and Veiga, 2008; Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). On the other hand, research found the negative impact of remote working, such as limited employee interaction, which reduces employee collaboration and creativity (Soga et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2015; Thorgeirsdottir and Kelliher, 2017). From an organization's perspective, adopting remote working practices economizes physical workspace and leads to higher work input from employees in exchange for autonomy and flexibility (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Gajendran et al., 2015). The adoption of remote working in organizations is driven by economic and technological shifts in job roles, growing digital literacy among employees and businesses, demographic changes with more women in senior roles, and an increasing proportion of the millennials in workforce with the growing need for personalization and autonomy (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2015; Gawer and Cusumano, 2014).

The above discussion suggests that research on remote working has largely focused on employee related outcomes such as employee productivity, and employee satisfaction without much focus on the buyer-seller relationship. This is because most work-from-home jobs might not require lead generation or deeper interactions with clients. However, the sales process inherently requires these two aspects.

However, remote selling specifically focuses on the process of selling that does not require the buyer and seller to be in the same place. The term remote selling does not focus on the location of work, but on the processes that facilitate the selling that are mediated by technology. The research on remote selling is often disguised as work-from-home selling and focused on salespeople's outcomes. For instance, previous research suggests that salespeople who work from home reported more anxiety and technostress (i.e., stress induced through the usage of technology) (Rangarajan et al., 2022; Pullins et al., 2020). In summary, previous research on remote selling has largely neglected the impact on buyer-seller relationships. Thus, we specifically focus on joint outcomes for both B2B clients and salespeople engaging in remote selling processes. While there is considerable overlap between remote working and remote selling, our focus is on remote selling which has three specific conditions. First, remote selling involves a sales process leading to a degree of interaction between buyer and seller where buyer and seller are not in the same physical space. Second, remote selling involves developing and maintaining relationships with clients. Third, remote selling involves a set of technologies that can facilitate the selling process between buyer and seller.

We refer to remote selling as the use of remote channels such as video conferencing, phone, automation, and social media to undertake essential sales functions. Remote selling incorporates both inside and outside salespeople who are currently using remote technologies and automation to oversee sales operations. In addition to the actual sales process, remote selling also involves critical sales-related exercises such as relationship building with clients, gathering market information, generating new leads, and providing after-sales service to clients (Singh et al., 2019).

2.2. Digital transformation and remote selling

Digital transformation refers to "the organizational change that is triggered and shaped by the widespread diffusion of digital technologies" (Hanelt et al., 2021). In the context of sales, digital transformation is concerned with modifying or realigning sales activities to incorporate digital technologies to boost the overall efficiency of sales operations and extend salesforce capabilities, which leads to a rethinking of the company's value propositions (Guenzi and Habel, 2020; Singh et al.,

2019). Organizations that undertake a digital transformation process often incorporate emerging digital technologies in their core sales functions, such as the implementation of Customer Relationship Management systems (CRM), use of automation in routine sales tasks, adoption of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) or cognitive computing that enable digital learning, self-service technologies, and vendor-independent platforms for consumers (Agnihotri et al., 2017a, 2017b; Bongers et al., 2021; Mattila et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2019). In doing so, digital transformation-aspiring organizations aim to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of sales operations from operational tasks such as data entry and inventory tracking to consumer interface activities, such as designing user-friendly applications to enhance buying experience (Zoltners et al., 2021). Such technological underpinnings of digital transformation have seen significant further growth during the global pandemic as sales organizations both optimize existing digital technologies and invest in new ones, thereby fostering value creation (Kim, 2020).

One of the most affected areas in digital transformation during the crisis is the transition towards remote selling, which has its roots in organizations' previous investment in digital communication technologies (Battisti et al., 2022; Horváth and Szabó, 2019). Although driven by crisis, remote selling practices have now become the new normal through the adoption of digital technologies at both the organization and the client's end. This motivated organizations to further invest in information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as Google Teams, MS Teams, Webex, and Zoom, and optimize their social media, websites, and other online platforms to increase the quality of communication (Battisti et al., 2022; Mariani et al., 2021).

Along with the availability of digital communication channels, remote selling is also welcomed by changing customer needs and preferences for remote interactions (Diebner et al., 2020). Digital transformation has equipped organizations with resources and set up to continue with remote selling even though physical meetings are now possible. Optimization in technology means that basic sales functions can take place through remote channels, but might this mode of selling create value for sales organizations and their clients?

2.3. Value creation in buyer-seller relationship

Value creation is defined as the perceived trade-off between benefits and sacrifices in buyer-seller relationships (Blocker et al., 2012). For customers, value is created when they perceive the sales transaction as desirable. As such, value refers to tangible and intangible benefits derived from the product or service received (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). For sellers, value refers to engaging in activities that can optimize a firm's economic value (Terho et al., 2012). In a competitive landscape, producing, distributing, or delivering goods and services may not be sufficient to create long-lasting value. Rather, a systematic process of uncovering customer needs and devising solutions tailored to that specific need is required. Such a process requires building, fostering, and sustaining relationships with customers (Haas et al., 2012). Specifically, salespeople provide the communication interface between relevant organizational departments (such as marketing and R&D) and customers, which in turn could help organizations optimize their offerings to meet and exceed customer needs (Guenzi and Troilo, 2006). Thus, salespeople play an essential role in creating value for both customers and organizations. Value creation in sales is linked to positive customer-related outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty, leading to higher profitability and firm performance (Sullivan et al., 2012; Blocker et al., 2012). The question of interest is: how can salespeople create superior value for both organizations and customers?

Previous research has identified several ways through which salespeople can create value by engaging in value appropriation activities that positively impact firm performance (Ramos et al., 2023; Singh and Koshy, 2011). Generally, technology-mediated communications enhance manager-salesperson-customer relationships (see review of

Agnihotri et al., 2023) For instance, the use of social media in the sales process is found to affect perceived value by increasing relational selling and can thus enhance customer value (Agnihotri et al., 2017a, 2017b; Hansen and Levin, 2016). Similarly sales technologies like CRM can also increase relationship performance (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2016; Ogilvie et al., 2018) Finally, sales firms can design various interactive and self-service channels (such as AI tools, and company websites) that can complement salespeople's role to enhance efficiency by reducing information asymmetry (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2019). This is particularly useful when the characteristics and specifications of sales offerings are beyond salespeople's expertise.

Specifically, within the domain of value creation using digital technologies, recent research has examined salespeople's orientation towards technology, their social media usage for value creation, the role of supervisors and sales managers in fostering digital selling processes, and the role of virtual agents in creating value for consumers through e-commerce channels (Kramer and Krafft, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023; Guenzi and Nijssen, 2023; Hoffmann et al., 2023; Harrmann et al., 2023; Itani et al., 2023). However, these studies do not consider how remote selling could create value in buyer-seller relationships.

As remote selling involves no physical meetings with clients, might remote selling offer advantages to both organizations and customers that eliminate the need for salespeople to spend time on the roads or scheduling physical meetings with clients? As value creation is a complex, multidimensional concept with varying perspectives, we first delineate different schools of thought on value creation. Then, we discuss competence and relational perspectives of value creation as our framework to understand the remote selling process.

2.3.1. Conceptualizing value creation

The conceptualization of value creation varies across different schools of thought. Primarily in sales, value creation is conceptualized through competence, relational activity, customer perception, and co-creation by supplier and customer (Sullivan et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012). Value creation as competence refers to understanding customer business needs and focusing on product, marketing communications, and the firm's internal expertise that significantly affects the firm's performance. (Ritter, 2006; Harmsen and Jensen, 2004). Value creation as a relational activity refers to developing and nurturing buyer-seller relationships such that it leads to positive outcomes for both parties (Ulaga, 2003). Value can also be conceptualized through customers' perception of the seller's activities and their overall evaluation of the business exchange (Ulaga and Chacour, 2001; Parasuraman et al., 1991). Finally, value can be created by the continuous participation of buyers and sellers in activities that benefit both. In this school of thought, value is created by using customers' input and their continuous involvement (Payne et al., 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Although there are several dimensions of value creation, we focus on the competence and relational aspects of value creation as our primary research interest lies on exploring the firm's perspective.

2.3.2. Value creation as competence activity

Early research on the value chain predominantly focused on managing competencies that can create value for firms (Piercy, 1998; Porter, 1985). A firm's competencies play a significant role in value creation as they signify efficiency and effectiveness that would directly or indirectly have a positive impact on a firm's performance (Guesalaga, 2016; Möller, 2006). These competencies are seen as building blocks of firm performance (Harmsen and Jensen, 2004) and could originate in activities such as structuring staff, realigning their activities to consumer preferences, or investing in new technologies. A certain activity or a change could create value for a firm by increasing its competence in existing tasks (Sullivan et al., 2012).

A firm's competency is not just the product itself, but also the communication around the product (McEvily et al., 2000), which involves sharing knowledge and resources among the employees,

providing quick information and technical assistance to buyers, and providing them with personalized services (Paschen et al., 2021; Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006). Therefore, salespeople's competence including the ability to optimally use multiple digital technologies and to proficiently execute sales operations remotely become extremely important in value creation. Remote selling can contribute to value creation if it increases a firm's competencies in existing sales operations and positively affects economic goals (Ryssel et al., 2004).

2.3.3. Value creation as relational activity

A substantial body of research emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing value creation from the relational perspective (Ulaga, 2003; Flint et al., 1997; Dyer and Singh, 1998). Relational values are conceived through the relationship between buyer and seller and contribute to the benefits of both parties (Möller, 2013; Ulaga, 2003). One important aspect of building and managing relationships is consumer interaction (Arli et al., 2018; Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000). Values can also be created through the dyadic exchange between two parties as the sellers' focus on customer value shapes their activities (Terho et al., 2012; Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, the relationship marketing perspective advocates value creation through building and nurturing business relationships (Palmatier, 2008; Walter, 1999). In this perspective, value is created when involved parties take steps to initiate, foster, and sustain a relationship, and building customer relationships leads to favorable outcomes such as increased brand equity and brand loyalty (Christopher et al., 2013; Palmatier, 2008).

Frontline salespeople play an important role in the value creation process (Singh et al., 2019) as boundary-spanning relational activities are at the core of the value creation process (Sullivan et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2012). Salespeople are also known as relationship promoters (Walter, 1999) for being at the front of the organization, and at a peak position to build relationships with customers as well as to understand and respond to their changing needs (e.g., Babakus et al., 1999). A long, sustainable relationship increases relationship closeness and creates value for both buyer and seller (Srivastava and Singh, 2010). On the other hand, lower perceived customer value may result in brand switching behavior. Therefore, a sustainable and lasting buyer-seller relationship is essential to value creation for both parties (Haas et al., 2012; Eggert et al., 2006; Walter et al., 2001).

However, changes in strategy, such as re-designing sales structures and the way salespeople interact with their customers, impact the way a firm creates value for customers (Sullivan et al., 2012). The emphasis on remote selling is likely to have a substantial impact on buyer-seller interaction and subsequently on the quality of their relationship. This is because of the amount of information available to both salespeople and customers, digitally optimized buyer-seller interactions, and reduced physical meetings (Singh et al., 2019; Jarvinen and Taiminen, 2016; Girotra and Netessine, 2011). As a consequence, value can be created when remote selling fosters quality interactions between salespeople and customers, where it can sustain and further develop their relationship.

2.4. Reacting to shock: Exaptation vs adaptation

Much current literature sees digital transformation as a deliberate, strategy-led program governed from the top (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2021). This implies a dominant teleological stance that emphasizes purposeful capability enactment (Van De Ven and Poole, 1995). However, in shock-driven contexts such as the pandemic, functional shifts often emerge before they are designed, making an evolutionary perspective useful for capturing the change process. In addition, while the traditional archetypes of new market creation focus on proactive innovation and entrepreneurial agency, reactive processes are often overlooked. This adaptationist view has similarly limited our understanding of how novelty arises in business contexts (Andriani and Cattani, 2016). The concept of exaptation offers a complementary

perspective, showing how new markets and business models can emerge when companies react to exogenous shocks by repurposing existing resources.

In evolutionary theory, the primary mechanism for the emergence of new traits is *adaptation*, which refers to the gradual modification of a trait driven by natural selection, assumes continuity in the selected function (Gould and Vrba, 1982). *Exaptation* on the other hand is introduced as a mechanism distinct from adaptation that describes a discontinuous evolutionary process resulting from a functional shift of an existing trait. Exapted traits are "evolved for other usages (or for no function at all) and later 'coopted' for their current role" (Gould and Vrba, 1982, p.6). In this sense, exaptation occurs when a trait begins to serve a different purpose, without necessarily undergoing additional adaptation. A classic example of exaptation in evolutionary biology are the bird feathers, which initially evolved for thermal regulation and were later exapted for flight (Gould and Vrba, 1982).

In organizational contexts, exaptation analogically refers to the process by which existing organizational capabilities or technologies take on new functions beyond their original design or adoption (Andriani et al., 2013). In this vein, innovative processes derived from adaptation and exaptation are differentiated by their opposing logic structure. Adaptive innovation deliberately matches a given problem with a solution that manifests a proposed function. A "new physical order", or *form* (Alexander, 1964, p.1), such as a new technology or organizational capability, is then purposefully developed in response to this intended function. On the other hand, the premise of exaptation is that preexisting forms in themselves often possess creative potentials, which can, upon disruptive circumstances or serendipitous discoveries, be realized to serve new functions – in this manner, "function follows form" (Andriani and Cattani, 2016, p.117). This innovational force has been manifested in various instances of technological advancement such as medical breakthroughs (Meyers, 2007) and product inventions (e.g., Picker, 2011; Osepchuk, 1984), often spurs novel trajectories towards emerging markets and industries (Levinthal, 1998; Dew et al., 2004). Table 2 further demonstrates the distinction between adaptation and exaptation.

Table 2

Distinction between adaptation and exaptation (based on Andriani and Carignani, 2014 and Andriani and Cattani, 2016).

	Exaptation	Adaptation
Definition	Discontinuous evolutionary process resulting from a functional shift of an existing trait.	Gradual modification of a trait driven by natural selection, assuming continuity in the selected function.
Logic	Function follows form – "Now that I have come to a result, what problem have I solved?" (Wiener, 1993, p.22)	Form follows function – "Given a problem, what's the solution?" (Alexander, 1964)
Generative mechanism	Reactive, unplanned, serendipitous (e.g., revealing hidden affordances)	Proactive, deliberate, strategic (e.g., intentional recombination of components)
Typical trigger	Exogenous shocks, crises, and radical disruptions	Identified needs, strategic planning, market signals
Innovation pattern	Transformational, breakthrough, paradigm-shifting	Incremental, scaling, efficiency-enhancing
Example in innovation	Lister's unplanned co-option of carbolic acid (a sewage deodoriser) for surgical antisepsis.	Deliberate refinement and standardisation of antisepsis protocols (dosage, technique, instruments) after the initial shift.
In our empirical context	Primary process for rapid functional shifts under shock (e.g., unplanned, reactive pivot to remote selling during pandemic).	Secondary process for assimilating and stabilizing the value created by exapted functions (e.g., infrastructure investment, role redesign and hybrid policies to institutionalize remote selling).

Making this distinction enhances explanatory power in theorizing reactive innovation, as the two mechanisms often unfold in a sequential manner. Andriani and Carignani (2014) decompose the exaptive-adaptive innovation process into three distinct sub-processes: "i) the emergence or association of a new function with an existing artifact, process, and ecosystem, ii) the deliberate selection of a new function as the basis for an innovative product, and iii) the adaptation as a process in which innovative products are transformed because of user selection." (p. 169). The first stage, functionality emergence can be reflective or serendipitous, while the latter stages (i.e., deliberate selection and adaptation) involve higher levels of intentionality in converting the existing artifact or capability into a new one and transforming the entire ecosystem.

Management scholars have been using exaptation to understand technology evolution, radical innovation, and problem solving (Andriani and Cattani, 2016; Andriani et al., 2017). This perspective provides an insightful angle to analyze how organizations leverage existing resources for emergent functions amidst disruption. For example, SMEs can innovate their business models by exapting existing resources as a rapid response to crisis (Codini et al., 2023). In the context of remote selling, salesforces were creatively exapted to enable new functions during the pandemic, as firms utilized digital infrastructure and existing capabilities in unanticipated ways. This not only enabled digitalized selling but also explored novel value-creation channels, which could catalyze radical acceleration in their digital transformation progress.

3. Research design

3.1. Research questions

The overall purpose of our research is to understand how the growing emphasis on remote selling affects value creation activities in B2B settings, as well as its consequential influence on digital transformation. Therefore, we focused on three key questions:

RQ1. : How does remote selling enhance value creation through competence and relational mechanisms?

RQ2. : What are the key mechanisms that prompted companies to rapidly modify their salesforce, thereby accelerating digital transformation during the crisis?

RQ3. : How can organizations effectively capitalize on this shift within their salesforce?

3.2. Methodology

We employed systematic combining, also known as the in-vivo approach, to explore our research questions (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Andersen and Kragh, 2010). This approach allows active use of theory throughout the research and facilitates data collection to corroborate, refine, and extend the theory (Irvine and Deo, 2006). The use of pre-existing schema to guide interviews allows researchers to systematically discover the order of themes as they unfold (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), making this approach useful in the B2B context. Rather than taking a purely inductive route, our research is guided by the lens of competence and the relational aspect of value creation (Sullivan et al., 2012). For the current research, this approach is useful in understanding how remote selling affects organization and individual-level activities.

3.3. Data collection

We followed non-random sampling by theoretical procedures (Cortez and Johnston, 2020) to shortlist industrial sales managers of sales-oriented organizations that engaged in remote selling. In this process, we used purposive sampling procedures (Campbell et al., 2020).

This sampling approach is beneficial as it allows researchers to engage with those participants who can provide an in-depth, and qualitatively rich explanation of their beliefs, thoughts, and experiences (Chase and Murtha, 2019). As such, we collaborated with the Institute of Sales Professionals, an industrial body that provides sales training and qualifications to its member sales organizations in the UK. The study brief and invitation were sent out to over 100 sales organizations in the UK. Initially, 26 participants expressed their interest, but three participants later dropped out, leaving us with a final sample of 23. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is typically determined by the principle of saturation - the point at which additional data produces no new insights (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). After 21 interviews, we observed substantial repetition in participants' responses and no emergence of new themes, which confirmed that saturation had been reached. To ensure robustness, we conducted two additional interviews, which validated that the saturation point reflected existing insights. Given its qualitative nature, this study is based on analytical rather than statistical investigations. The sample size is also consistent with prior qualitative studies (Bryant et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2023; Rayna and Striukova, 2021; Setkute and Dibb, 2022; Shah et al., 2023). We therefore concluded that 23 interviews provided a sufficient and rigorous sample size for examining how the growing emphasis on remote selling affects value creation activities in B2B settings, as well as broader influence of digital transformation.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams following Arsel's (2017) recommendations. The interview guide was developed broadly around the following areas: (1) the organization's investment in digital technologies, (2) moving from physical to remote selling, and (3) emerging value creation mechanisms. For each area, we assessed the organization's digital readiness related to its overall infrastructure, resources, experience, communication, and training provided to the staff. Each interview lasted between 35 and 75 min, which gave us 385 pages of transcript data. All interviews were conducted in English, and we provided participants interview guide prior to the interview date with a consent form. We used the auto-transcription function to transcribe the original interviews, and each author independently checked transcripts for accuracy. Table 3 summarizes sample characteristics.

3.4. Coding and data analysis

We adopted a systematic, multi-stage data analysis process that aligns with established qualitative research in B2B studies (e.g., Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Chase and Murtha, 2019), which involved three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). This procedure allowed us to progressively move from the raw interview data to insightful empirical findings, which eventually informed our proposed theoretical framework. Table 4 represents the data structure yielded from this analysis process.

The analysis began with the transcription of the recorded interviews and a thorough review of the transcripts by the research team. Each researcher read through the transcripts, taking notes on initial impressions and familiarizing themselves with the data, providing a foundation for the subsequent analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

The open coding stage was conducted by two co-authors in the research team. Using the NVivo software, the researchers independently examined the interview transcripts line-by-line to identify salient concepts and ideas related to sales structure and value creation. This process yielded a comprehensive set of initial codes, largely substantive in nature, that reflects practitioners' language. In the next step, the research team engaged in axial coding to group the initial codes into higher-level categories based on their conceptual similarities (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). For example, in the open-coding stage, we identified a variety of technological investments aimed at enhancing companies' digital sales competence, such as "upgrading e-commerce platforms", "adopting virtual selling technologies", and "mobile app for retailers". These initial codes were grouped under the higher-level concept of "Diversified

Table 3
Participants details.

Participant ID	Industry	Position	Position Tenure	Interview Duration	Age and Gender
R01	Logistics	Sales and Marketing Director	4 years	48:22	39, Male
R02	Food and Drinks	Commercial Director	4 years	38:48	40, Male
R03	Professional Service	CEO and Founder	7 years	48:44	49, Male
R04	Telecom	Client Manager	2 years	56:32	47, Male
R05	Travel and Tourism	Global Director of Sales Transformation	13 years	58:01	49, Male
R06	IT Solutions	Sales Director	2 years	1:01:06	56, Male
R07	Professional Services	Head of Sales	2 years	55:03	50, Female
R08	Distribution (Logistic)	Head of Sales Operations	5 years	51:00	59, Male
R09	Professional Services (former Logistics)	COO (former sales director)	7 months	46:34	60, Male
R10	Professional Service	Group Client Development Manager	4 Years	51:44	50, Female
R11	IT & Electronics	Sales and Marketing Director	8.5 years	42:30	60, Male
R12	Electrical Manufacturer	Sales Director for UK and IR	4 years	42:52	48, Male
R13	Medical Device manufacturer	Sales Director for UK and IR	6 years	48:26	40, Male
R14	Oilfield Service	Commercial Manager	1. 5 years	38:35	39, Male
R15	Travel and Tourism	Regional Head of Sales and Marketing for Europe	1.5 years	34:38	40, Male
R16	Oilfield Service	Sales Manager	10 years	1:01:56	44, Male
R17	Furniture Manufacture (former oilfield service)	Vice President (former Managing director)	2 months	37:01	52, Male
R18	Financial Service (Car leasing)	Sales and Marketing Director	3 years	44:36	41, Male
R19	B2B Tool supplier (Service)	Sales Director	4 months	45:05	40, Male
R20	Marketing & Communication	Director for New Business Account Development	3 years	41:27	39, Male
R21	IT solutions	Sales Directors for Enterprise Account	4 years	53:45	47, Male
R22	Financial Service (Car leasing)	Director of Sales	15 years	46:06	45, Male
R23	B2B Tool Supplier	Regional Business Director	3 years	51:12	57, Male

Digital Selling," reflecting a functional shift towards a diverse digital sales approach to accommodate the radical changes in the market.

The final stage of selective coding involved integrating the abstracted concepts into overarching themes and aggregate dimensions that formed the core of our theoretical framework (Gioia et al., 2013). The researchers examined the relationships and temporal sequence among the abstracted concepts, organizing them into the overarching themes of "Competence-oriented Value Creation," "Relationship-oriented Value Creation," and "Remote Selling Assimilation." Drawing on the insight of evolutionary logic, these themes were then further aggregated into the two main dimensions of our processual framework: "Sale Force Exaptation" and "Subsequent Adaptations". By this crucial distinction and their temporal relationship, we proceeded to develop a theoretical framework that can be generalized to explain the organizational changes and their underpinning mechanisms unveiled from our data. This multi-stage analysis procedure ensures that our theoretical framework is firmly grounded in the empirical data (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013).

4. Findings

Fig. 1 and Table 5 summarize our findings, and the following sections provide a detailed discussion of each theme that emerged through our interviews.

4.1. Emerging value creation channels

4.1.1. Competence-oriented value

4.1.1.1. High-cadence selling. Remote selling enables more frequent client meetings through videoconferencing platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Sales managers report that this has increased the availability of salespeople to cater to more clients on a day-to-day basis. As meetings are quick and to the point, remote selling practices also increase responsiveness from both clients and senior managers. People also became more willing to meet online versus in physical settings due to time constraints. This allows salespeople to schedule more meetings in a limited time, with the potential to increase operational efficiency, as mentioned by the CEO and founder of a professional sales firm as follows.

"So, because people are far more willing to give up their time, the

actual cadence of interactions with customers is increased. You know, if you did meetings because people were going well physically, I've got to free up my diary, you struggle to get more than maybe one or two meetings on a project a month. Now, you can get meeting with the global buying group, and then you can probably set the time for the next meeting there and then. Therefore, you potentially end up doing so much more in a day than you actually, originally did." (R03).

4.1.1.2. Travel reduction. Remote selling has reduced the need for external salespeople to travel to visit clients. Previously, clients preferred in-person visits, but with investment and growth in communication and information technologies, the need for face-to-face meetings has declined. Managers emphasize that decreased travel increases the time salespeople have for other sales activities and reduces costs associated with travel. Here is a quotation from the head of sales operations of a logistics firm on the emerging value associated with decreased traveling.

"Because I think it's interesting you think of the other benefits as well, you know if your people are not going out making calls, they can do it this way. So, there's a reduction in the cost of an individual going out to do that. There tends to be a salary difference between a field person, and somebody works inside. Yeah, so these there's some benefits in this space to do a bit of refunds in about the kind of roles." (R08).

4.1.1.3. Diversified digital selling. Alongside increasing sales efficiency, remote selling has also motivated companies to diversify their digital sales capabilities, adopting new technologies and platforms to transform customer-facing operations. This diversification represents another significant value creation channel emerging from the shift of salesforce. For example, e-commerce and virtual selling can improve sales transparency and online shopping experience, as described by a commercial director of a food and beverage firm:

"On e-commerce, very basic stuff like imagery, pricing descriptions, it has to have the right taxonomy online, so we are investing a lot in tracking the quality of our execution online. We also continue to invest in platforms like virtual selling and video platforms to make sure that team using the very best technology they can in order to operate efficiently using this technology" (R02).

This multi-venue approach aligns with rising market demand for digital selling options and remote customer engagement. Some companies managed to thrive and exceed sales levels even compared to pre-

Table 4
Data structure.

Sample quotes	Categorized codes	Abstracted Concept	Emergent Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"So, because people are far more willing to give up their time, the actual cadence of interactions with customers is increased. You know, if you did meetings because people were going well physically, I've got to free up my diary, you struggle to get more than maybe one or two meetings on a project a month. Now, you can get meeting with the global buying group, and then you can probably set the time for the next meeting there and then. Therefore, you potentially end up doing so much more in a day than you actually, originally did." (R03)	Rise in number and frequency of meetings	High Cadence Selling	*Competence-oriented Value creation*	**Sale force Exaptation**
"Because I think it's interesting you think of the other benefits as well, you know if your people are not going out making calls, they can do it this way. So, there's a reduction in the cost of an individual going out to do that. There tends to be a salary difference between a field person, and somebody works inside. Yeah, so these there's some benefits in this space to do a bit of refunds in about the kind of roles." (R08)	Efficiency through less travels that save travel cost and wasted time	Travel Reduction		
"On e-commerce, very basic stuff like imagery, pricing descriptions, it has to have the right taxonomy online, so we are investing a lot in tracking the quality of our execution online. We also continue to invest in platforms like virtual selling and video platforms to make sure that team using the very best technology they can in order to operate efficiently using this technology" (R02)	Use of multiple channels to cater to individual customer needs	Diversified Digital Selling		
"Decision makers are actually more available remotely. You're trying to get decision makers physically somewhere is more complex than getting them remotely somewhere, so I think obviously, economically there's maybe not as many opportunities, but you would have thought that might change, but the actual sales cycle seems to be shorter." (R12)	Engaging several decision makers within an organization to speed the sales process	Cross Boundary Customer Engagement	*Relationship-oriented Value creation*	
"I think that openness of relationship. In fact, we can see into peoples' homes and so on. I think it's brought the human element a bit closer together, and that's allowing, I think, for some much deeper relationships between salespeople and decision makers, and wider stakeholders, at certainly some of the bigger organizations." (R07)	Intimacy and personal connections that is developed between buyer and seller outside the usual office settings	Personalized Salespeople-Customer Relationship		
"So the guys have worked really hard to be more consultative, more advisory, more approachable and actually, you know a lot of our marketing activities have been almost kind of giving people information, giving people access to content so that you know they can engage with us in their own time, and that were available when they would want to talk to us rather than us being too aggressive in our kind of outbound communications."(R20)	Evolving role of salespeople in consultative and mentorship roles	Advisory Partnership		
"Organizations are actively investing in remote working environment. Yeah, so I mean the obvious one is what we're using now. Is this video technology that you whether you use Skype, zoom teams, et cetera. […] So, whatever you invest in, you probably want to invest in a cloud type contract where you can change an update on a very frequent basis. 'cause this technology is going to get better and better." (R09)	Investing in digital technologies and remote working environment to facilitate remote salesforce	Enabling infrastructure	*Remote selling assimilation*	**Subsequent Adaptations**
"So almost like a trusted, trusted advisor to that business and that ability to provide guidance and insights and become almost like a consultant to that business to give them a heads up on what they should be aware of is something that all organizations, if they're going to be successful, have to now master." (R13)	Targeted training to build digital competencies and soft skills for remote selling	Augmented sales roles		
"First one would be Internal salespeople will continue using video teleconference. Probably number one. I think all external salespeople will probably be encouraged to use their time more efficiently and maybe have a guideline as to how do we reduce their travel time? Which in essence will reduce their physical time, customer facing physical time. So, I think it's probably more you know, initiating a customer engagement is probably good reason for physical time and project closures either in existing or new, is a very good reason for physical time." (R11)	Implementing policies and guidelines for optimizing the balance between remote and in-person selling	Strategic hybrid selling		

crisis periods:

"We've got this particular app. We've got 29,000 retailers their business. These are yeah, store owners. We can use that app very successfully to sell to them, and we probably had our best, this will be our best year on the app." (R10).

4.1.2. Relationship-oriented value

4.1.2.1. Cross-boundary customer engagement. The increased accessibility provided by digital tools allows both salespeople and customers to be more available, which results in greater collaboration between sales representatives and diverse client company stakeholders. This movement creates new value in remote selling by enabling sellers to develop comprehensive relationships that extend beyond transactional interactions focused on specific products or services. Salespeople can now more easily engage with decision-makers and stakeholders across various levels within the client organization, gaining a holistic view of the customer's broader business context, needs and challenges. This
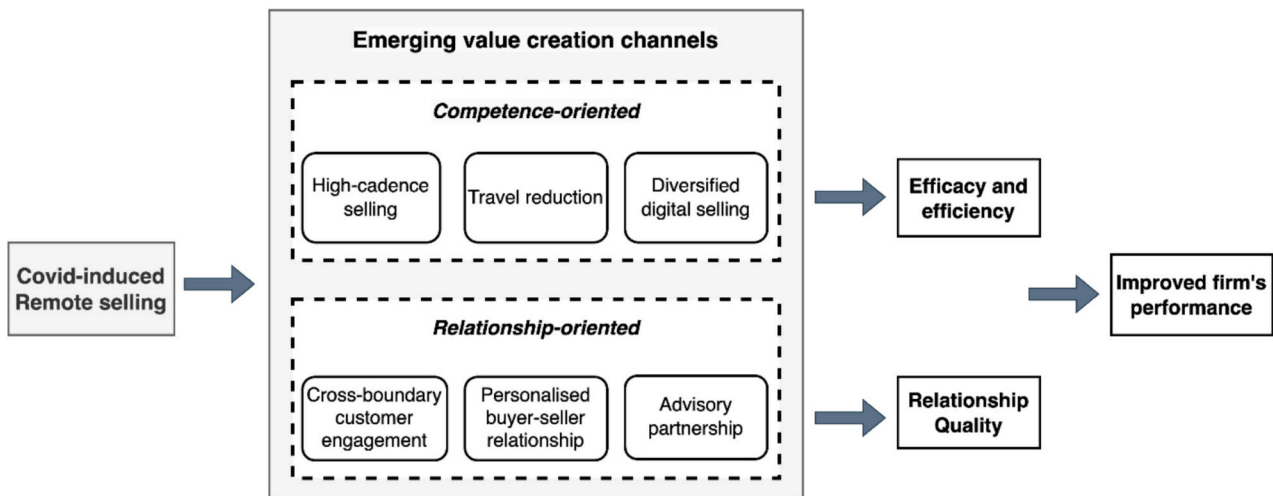
Fig. 1. New value creation channels in remote selling.

Table 5
Emerging value creation themes.

Emerging Value Creation themes	Explanation in Study's Context	Related Literature
Competence Oriented Themes		
High Cadence Selling	Rise in number and frequency of meetings	Donchack et al. (2022) Bashaw et al. (2002)
Travel Reduction	Efficiency through less travels that save travel cost and wasted time	Donchack et al. (2022)
Diversified Digital Selling	Use of multiple channels to cater to individual customer needs	Diebner et al. (2020) Alonso-Garcia et al. (2021)
Relational Oriented Themes		
Cross Boundary Customer Engagement	Engaging several decision makers within an organization to speed the sales process	Cortez et al. (2023); Leek et al. (2019); Rangarajan et al., 2022)
Personalized Salespeople-Customer Relationship	Intimacy and personal connections that is developed between buyer and seller outside the usual office settings	Itani et al. (2023) Moncrief et al. (2015) Lacoste (2016)
Advisory Partnership	Evolving role of salespeople in consultative and mentorship roles	Agnihotri et al. (2017a, 2017b) Cuevas (2018)

boundary-spanning function could facilitate consensus-building and break down silos that previously hindered sales interactions, ultimately deepening understanding of the needs of the client business.

Moreover, interactions through digital technologies empower salespeople to unite a company's decision-making across organizational boundaries in the service of the customer. For example, coordinating with multiple decision makers from different areas becomes easier, which can lead to an acceleration of the sales closure process. It is noted that though economic conditions may limit sales opportunities, shortened sales cycles tend to create compensatory value, which was described by the sales manager of an electric manufacturing firm:

"Decision makers are actually more available remotely. You're trying to get decision makers physically somewhere is more complex than getting them remotely somewhere, so I think obviously, economically there's maybe not as many opportunities, but you would have thought that might change, but the actual sales cycle seems to be shorter." (R12).

4.1.2.2. Personalized salespeople-customer relationship. Remote selling via digital media brings out the human aspect of buyer-seller relationships by providing a view into people's personal environments. Seeing clients in their homes helps visualize them as actual humans and fosters greater openness, trust, and stronger connections. Below are the thoughts of the sales and marketing director of a logistics firm.

"I think that openness of relationship. In fact, we can see into peoples' homes and so on. I think it's brought the human element a bit closer together, and that's allowing, I think, for some much deeper relationships between salespeople and decision makers, and wider stakeholders, at certainly some of the bigger organizations." (R07).

Casual intimacy and personal connections are enabled by visually entering each other's remote spaces. When bonds once confined to professional relations now interweave the personal, new types of dynamism between salesperson and buyer are formed, which represents a relationship-rich value creation avenue emerging from remote work.

"You know, people's kids running in, people being in slightly more casual clothes. You can see the kind of pictures behind you on the wall. You know, whatever it might be, I think we, we all individually had to let some of our own barriers and protection down. We didn't have the protection of our corporate office or are smart suit with us anymore. We lost that barrier and so I think that just think, it just helps people. Be a bit more 'them' and that's quite good, isn't it?" (R01).

4.1.2.3. Advisory partnerships. Remote selling also facilitates salespeople evolving into advisory and consultative roles beyond traditional product selling. As market demands shift, salespeople are expected to be available more readily for a variety of tasks, such as consultancy and information-seeking services. This perception has been fuelled by the use of remote channels because buyers are likely to consider salespeople as working "within the organization". With the help of intelligence harnessed from CRM data, salespeople are able to step into consultative roles. This process has also increased expectations from salespeople and thereby positive attitudes towards digitalization. These notions were visible in interview data throughout the discussion on remote working. Below is the quote from the director of new business accounts:

"So the guys have worked really hard to be more consultative, more advisory, more approachable and actually, you know a lot of our marketing activities have been almost kind of giving people information, giving people access to content so that you know they can engage with us in their own time, and that were available when they would want to talk to us rather than us being too aggressive in our kind of outbound communications."(R20).

To summarize, the findings in this section suggest that the functional shift of salesforce during the radical disruption led to the emergence of new value creation opportunities, setting the stage for further organizational changes, which will be illustrated in the following section.

4.2. Assimilating remote selling

Upon revealing of the novel value creation channels, companies were seen to make follow-up changes to deliberately assimilate remote selling into their organizational operations, leading to holistic adaptations. We identify several common areas where substantive codes can be categorized to reflect the adaptive actions of sales-oriented companies in our findings as follows.

4.2.1.1. Enabling infrastructure. To enable and stabilize remote selling, companies are actively investing in infrastructure to facilitate their sales practices. One sales manager commented on the importance of digital communication tools and cloud-based technologies.

"Organizations are actively investing in remote working environment. Yeah, so I mean the obvious one is what we're using now. Is this video technology that you whether you use Skype, zoom teams, et cetera. […] So, whatever you invest in, you probably want to invest in a cloud type contract where you can change an update on a very frequent basis. 'cause this technology is going to get better and better." (R09).

Additionally, remote working infrastructure extends to employees' homeworking environment. Providing salespeople with proper ergonomics and comfortable professional spaces to do their best work remotely is viewed as critical for successful remote selling and engagement. Companies want salespeople to have the right home office setup to enable effective remote work.

"From a technology point of view, you know people have got to have the right set up. You know the home Office setup is vitally important, so as opposed to the expectation on the employee having that." (R11).

4.2.1.2. Augmented sales role. With the shift towards consultative and advisory sales roles, training for new skills become critical to companies that engage in remote selling. Managers are focused on building ambidextrous abilities and positioning salespeople as trusted advisors.

"So almost like a trusted, trusted advisor to that business and that ability to provide guidance and insights and become almost like a consultant to that business to give them a heads up on what they should be aware of is something that that all organizations, if they're going to be successful, have to have to now master." (R13).

4.2.1.3. Strategic hybrid selling. Finally, policies for working in hybrid ways are set up by proactive companies to balance efficiency and value in both in-person and remote selling. Remote selling will continue but guidelines prioritize in-person meetings at key moments. Through this companies are seeking to institutionalize a way of optimal hybrid working, an example is to stress physical time for initial connections and project closure for customer relationship quality.

"First one would be Internal salespeople will continue using video teleconference. Probably number one. I think all external salespeople will probably be encouraged to use their time more efficiently and maybe have a guideline as to how do we reduce their travel time? Which in essence will reduce their physical time, customer facing physical time. So, I think it's probably more you know, initiating a customer engagement is probably good reason for physical time and project closures either in existing or new, is a very good reason for physical time." (R11).

To summarize, subsequent adaptations identified in this section highlight the deliberate efforts of organizations to assimilate and institutionalize the changes brought about by the new functions of the salesforce.

5. Emerging theoretical framework

Crises and major disruptions represent exogenous shocks that threaten the continuity of conventional sales practices. Under these circumstances, organizations are compelled to rapidly innovate and adapt to ensure their survival, often without the luxury of extensive planning or resource acquisition. Our findings reveal how sales-oriented companies, faced with such selection pressure, had to take a radical pivot towards remote selling by leveraging their existing technologies and capabilities in novel ways. Drawing on evolutionary theory, we argue for an account to conceptualize this process as exaptation (Andriani and Cattani, 2016). As introduced earlier, exaptation refers to the occurrence where an existing trait or capability is co-opted for a new function, often in response to environmental shocks (Gould and Vrba, 1982). This evolutionary process involves the emergence of a new functionality associated with an existing structure and the selection of this functionality as the basis for a new product or service, which leads to the subsequent adaptations (Andriani and Carignani, 2014). This aptly captures how sales organizations realigned their salesforces and digital infrastructure to enable remote selling during the pandemic, contrasting with the more gradual, directed process of adaptation. This distinction between exaptation and adaptation is crucial, as it highlights the transformative potential of reactive, crisis-driven changes (Andriani and Cattani, 2016).

Drawing on these concepts, we abstract a three-stage process from our findings, which can be generalized to a theoretical framework to explain shock-induced innovative responses and their transformative implications. This processual framework explicitly unfolds the temporal stages that underpin the transformative impact of exaptation. As these exapted capabilities became assimilated into the organizations' routines and strategies, firms were prompted to reconsider their value propositions, thereby accelerating their digital transformation progress. This framework is illustrated in Fig. 2. In the pre-pandemic context, technology artifacts and capabilities for remote selling, were confined to basic applications, i.e., occasional virtual meetings. The existing sales practices were heavily centered around in-person interactions, and companies were slow with full digital integration. The onset of the pandemic restrictions represents a radical external disruption that triggered intense selection pressure on sales organizations, forcing them to digitalize their sales practices for survival. Our findings in Section 4.1 demonstrate how this exaptation of the salesforce for remote selling led to the emergence of novel value creation channels. These include competence-oriented mechanisms such as high-cadence selling and diversified digital selling, as well as relationship-oriented mechanisms like cross-boundary customer engagement and personalized seller-buyer relationships. By seizing these value creation opportunities, companies realized new functional potentials from existing resources. The alignment of pre-existing resources and capabilities to this new functionality exemplifies an exaptive process.

While the reactive exaptation process may be rapid, stabilizing the new functions often requires deliberate assimilation and subsequent adaptations (Codini et al., 2023; Dew et al., 2004). As the exaptive process stabilized, the external environment also concurrently evolved. Buyers increasingly favored digitally enabled sales interactions and sought more consultative partnerships from sellers, representing shifted market demands and expectations as the external force to further request the internal adaptations. Section 4.2 summarized the findings around how companies made concerted post-exaptation efforts to assimilate remote selling into their sales operations and institutionalize the emergent value creation mechanisms. These adaptations included investing in enabling infrastructure, targeted upskilling for augmented sales roles, and implementing strategic hybrid selling policies. By providing the necessary foundation, skills, and guidelines, these deliberate actions allowed companies to integrate remote selling as a core part of their sales operations and stabilize the emergent value creation channels. This contrast between the rapid, reactive nature of the initial exaptation and the deliberate, proactive character of the subsequent adaptations marks the distinct yet complementary stages of the transformative process illustrated in our framework. These internal and external forces combine in a sales-market dynamism, in turn drive
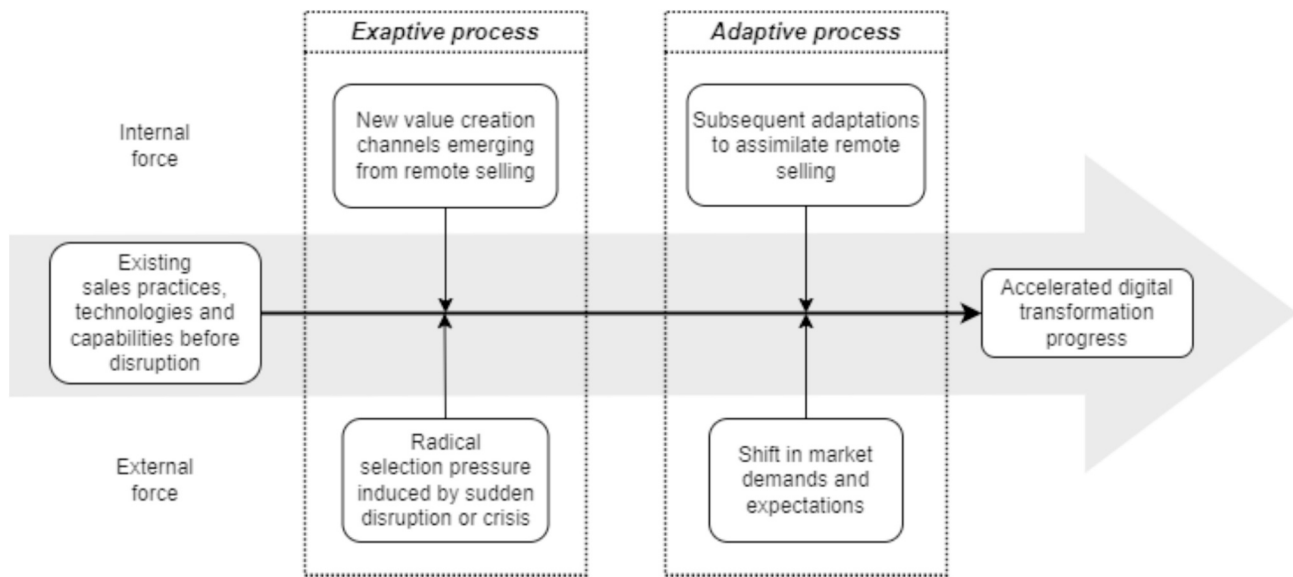
Fig. 2. Processual framework of digital transformation from remote selling exaptation.

businesses onto transformative trajectories.

Our framework—from pre-disruption status quo to exaptation of salesforce for value creation, to deliberate adaptations assimilating this shift—entails a processual structure for understanding crisis-induced organizational changes. Propelled by this momentum, sales-oriented organizations may undergo holistic digital integration and direct themselves towards new organizational identity and value propositions, realizing rapidly accelerated digital transformation (Wessel et al., 2021).

This framework advances innovation management theories by showing how existing resources can be leveraged through exaptation amidst disruptions. It extends beyond the prevailing focus on planned change, illuminating the transformative potential of reactive processes. Moreover, juxtaposing exaptation and adaptation elucidates how salesforce shifts unfold—first reactively during crisis, then deliberately with efforts to integrate changes (in line with Andriani and Cattani, 2016 and Gould and Vrba, 1982). Ultimately, mindful steering of the systemic interplay between exaptation and adaptation is critical for organizations to capitalize on crisis-driven innovations.

6. General discussion

The 2020s have witnessed a rapid transformation in sales processes. Most of these changes are attributed to new technological advances such as AI, the continually rising popularity of social media, growing digital literacies among businesses and customers, and environmental changes such as restrictions caused by the pandemic, along with increased focus on sustainability (such as reducing carbon footprints, and green marketing). Specifically, the crisis caused by the pandemic accelerated digital transformation processes triggering key and lasting changes in sales processes. One such change is the rise in remote selling. Although remote working in areas outside sales was already gaining momentum before the pandemic, sales departments, particularly outside sales functions, were mostly untouched by digital transformation because physical meetings with clients are considered an integral part of the sales process. However, the crisis brought significant investment in digital technologies across industries. This, in turn, allowed many sales organizations to experiment with remote selling. With the hybrid sales model (mix of remote and in-person) becoming more and more predominant in many industry sectors, creating intimacy and value with customers through digital interaction has become an important agenda for many sales organizations (Donchack et al., 2023). Although some

organizations have adopted remote selling or a hybrid system, many organizations are still struggling to strike the right balance, especially as relying on remote sales may sacrifice the quality of sales interactions (Ahearne et al., 2025).

Current research is an initiative to fill this void in the literature by illuminating how salespeople can create value for both customers and organizations through remote channels. While previous research, even the ones involving salespeople, has looked at the employee well-being, and productivity associated with remote selling, or has focused on hybrid sales (Peasley et al., 2020; Rangarajan et al., 2022; Ramos et al., 2023), the research exploring how remote selling shapes salespeople-client relationships is limited (e.g., Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025). While previous research has identified competence and relationship building as key dimensions of value creation (Sullivan et al., 2012), it is not clear how remote selling affects these dimensions. Through the lens of exaptation and adaptation, our exploratory research with senior sales managers working across different industries identified several competence and relational themes associated with remote selling.

7. Theoretical contributions

First, we advance the literature on remote working and remote selling, extending conversations in the domains of organizational change and sales technology adoption. Prior research has primarily used remote working or work-from-home as an umbrella concept to explore employee productivity, well-being, and organizational efficiency (Pokojski et al., 2022; Sullivan, 2012). Our research differ in two key aspects. Rather than examining remote work broadly, we focus specifically on remote selling—that is, sales activities conducted through digital and remote technologies regardless of physical location. Existing research on remote or hybrid sales has mainly examined individual or team-level challenges such as technological stressors, salesperson personality, or hybrid team coordination (Micallef et al., 2024; Peesker et al., 2024; Ahearne et al., 2025). By contrast, our study positions remote selling as a strategic organizational response to technological and market disruption, thereby contributing to the literature on how organizations enact and sustain change through digital tools (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; Orlikowski, 1996). We demonstrate that remote selling can be a vehicle for positive value creation in buyer–seller relationships, answering calls to understand how digital transformation reshapes value creation processes (Singh et al., 2019).

Second, we contribute to the value creation and sales technology

literatures by identifying specific competence-based and relational mechanisms through which remote selling generates value. While previous research on sales has focused on the importance of buyer and seller being in the same physical space for effective selling (Jokiniemi et al., 2024; Kaski et al., 2018), our findings reveal that relationships can thrive even without physical proximity through cross-boundary customer engagement, personalized interactions, and advisory partnerships. This extends the literature on sales technology adoption by illustrating how digital tools not only replace but redefine selling competences and relational value (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2019). Hence, we highlight the role of technology-enabled selling as both an operational adaptation and a relational innovation.

Third, we advance the application of evolutionary concepts of exaptation and adaptation within innovation management and organizational change theories (Gould and Vrba, 1982; Andriani and Carignani, 2014; Andriani and Cattani, 2016). Our framework of *salesforce exaptation* provides a processual lens to explain how firms reconfigure existing sales resources to seize new opportunities in times of radical disruption. The urgent exaptation of remote selling not only introduced new mechanisms of value creation but also led to organizational-level learning and adaptation, mirroring the transformation pathways described in innovation management research (Dew et al., 2004; Teece, 2018). Our findings show that technological exaptation may catalyze deeper organizational transformation, including shifts in identity and value propositions from product-oriented selling to consultative, partnership-based models. This integrative perspective contributes to understanding how innovation and organizational change co-evolve during technology-driven transformation (Leonardi, 2011; Codini et al., 2023; Levinthal, 1998).

8. Managerial implications

While there is growing attention to remote working and digital transformation in many industries (HBRAS, 2021), organizations have yet to fully realize the potential of remote selling. Significant challenges remain present in the post-pandemic time for remote selling implementation (Ahearne et al., 2025). The rapid pace of digital transformation further compounds the situation, introducing new layers of uncertainties for managers in impacted organizations. Our study harvested managerial insights obtained through comprehensive findings, which help generate actionable guidelines for sales-oriented organizations and managers in salesforce.

8.1. Implications for remote selling

A recent survey on remote selling identified significant challenges faced by remote salespeople. These challenges included a lack of right content and technology to engage and interact with clients, low motivation to engage with consumers, and an inability to discover their needs using remote channels (Smartwinnr, 2023) and sacrifice on quality of interactions (Ahearne et al., 2025). Our findings offer insights to meet some of these challenges and capitalize on the potential of remote selling.

First, our study suggests that remote selling has great potential to create meaningful, personal relationships between sellers and buyers by making the online interactions, such as Zoom meetings, more human (vs. corporate). If used strategically, these online meetings can be used to build better rapport with the buyers on a personal level, as salespeople are sometimes able to look into people's personal living spaces and lives (i.e., living room, office, pets, and children). By leveraging the "quantity" or the high-cadence selling (due to reduced travel), salespeople can quickly learn about the client and their background, and build better personal relationships that could not be possible when meetings was only available in-person in an official setting, such as an office and the client's site.

Second, organizations should ensure that buyers are engaging with the right and meaningful sales channels throughout the sales cycle. Therefore, sales organizations should focus on harvesting technology-enabled sales capability – "an organization's ability to leverage technology resources to facilitate or reinforce sales force process and activities" (Badrinarayanan et al., 2022, pp. 358–359). This capability involves the firm's ability to identify the right technology for its sales professionals to adopt and should complement their sales process. As evidenced in our research, an omnichannel or diversified digital selling approach is extremely important. This means making available the self-service platforms where buyers can easily access offerings (i.e., e-commerce) while making salespeople ready to support whenever they are required. The e-commerce platform is helpful for existing and potential clients as research stage (i.e., price comparisons and alternative products/service offerings). Making use of social media can also add value to buyer-seller relationships more personally, as previous studies show that salesperson's use of social media is positively associated with personalized service (Agnihotri et al., 2017a, 2017b). Thus, sales organizations should structure and implement the right technologies for the right sales stage and purposes for sales enablement (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025).

Finally, to continuously create values for firms and customers, organizations should keep an open mind for changes and technological challenges and prioritize sales enablement – cross-functional assimilation (marketing, training operations, management, automation etc.) of content, process, and technology that readies firms to more productively assist the customer journey (Peterson and Dover, 2020, p.46). As we learned from this study, while exogenous shocks are unpredictable, surviving sales organizations endured by navigating the exaptation–adaptation process, which turned technological challenges into core value creation opportunities. To further leverage ongoing digital transformation in sales, such as AI enabled CRM, sales organizations should focus on upskilling salespeoples' technological competencies while also fostering personal development in time management and emotional intelligence. These dual investments can both strengthen buyer-seller relationships and help salespeople uncover consumer needs more effectively (Kidwell et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2018).

8.2. Implications for digital transformation

While the rate of digital transformation has accelerated in many functional areas of business, it has been relatively slower in sales because of a lack of a comprehensive framework and clarity on how salespeople should approach technology (Juengst, 2023). Organizations should start by identifying the resistance and issues around the digital transformation specific to their sales department, especially digital transformation has negative impact on salespeople in terms of workload and stress (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2021).

Managers should provide job clarity to salespeople so that they can understand their role and value in the digitally equipped sales world. This would involve restructuring their sales responsibilities to work around relevant technologies such as AI and automation and defining their workload. The perception of increased workload is one of the barriers to the adoption of digitalization (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2021). Any changes in salesforce structure (e.g., growing inside sales team, similar task deployment to inside and outside sales team, hiring of subject matter experts) should be timely communicated to all sales employees.

We recommend organizations provide a systematic pathway on how to approach, nurture, and sustain relationships with their clients from pre-selling to post-selling processes in the digital landscape and on how to leverage various touchpoints in remote selling through which salespeople can meet buyers' expectations in terms of creating value. The objective of remote selling and digital transformation in essence is to expand the business' value creation profile and overall performance. Managers should focus on how remote channels can create value at different stages of buyers' journey.

9. Limitations and future research

We close this paper by noting the limitations of this study and pointing out directions for future research opportunities. First, we collected data using a cross-sectional research design, which provides a snapshot of a specific period in time. This might limit the usefulness of our study. Future research should conduct a longitudinal study to examine how remote selling evolves over time. Second, our data were collected in a single country, the UK, to address our research questions. Therefore, a promising avenue for future research would be to replicate this study in other countries to examine whether our findings can be generalized to other geographical areas. Third, we restricted our investigation to sales managers' perspectives. Future studies could consider the client and other stakeholders' perspectives to understand how buyer-seller relationships have transitioned through remote sales.

As the pandemic presented unprecedented societal changes (HBRAS, 2021), our results inherently reflect short-term consequences, especially for the nascent subject of remote selling. Future research should investigate which firms persist with remote sales and the factors enabling its ongoing validity (Battisti et al., 2022).

At a broader level, applying the evolutionary exaptation lens to study crisis-adapted transformations in other operations like marketing, HR, and product innovation represents an important direction for management scholarship. As the frequency and severity of disruptions accelerate globally, understanding crisis-induced organizational transformations becomes increasingly crucial. This research provides a useful foundation to expand the application of exaptation theory for crisis management scholarship.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kshitij Bhoumik: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Reika Igarashi:** Methodology, Formal analysis. **Merve Vardarsuyu:** Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Linhao Fang:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Author statement

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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