Sami Kailio

AI in the B2B sales process of international SMEs

School of Marketing and Communication
Master’s thesis
Master's Degree Programme in
International Business

Vaasa 2024

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
School of Marketing and Communication
Author: Sami Kailio
Title of the Thesis: AI in the B2B sales process of international SMEs
Degree: Master of Science in Economic and Business Administration
Programme: International Business
Supervisor: Arto Ojala
Year: 2024 **Sivumäärä:** 65

ABSTRACT:

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become easily available for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in recent years. This study investigates the adoption and utilisation of AI in Finnish international SMEs from a business-to-business (B2B) sales perspective. AI´s current benefits and challenges and what types of tools are used are studied through qualitative interviews with sales leaders from six companies. The companies operate in digital industries, either developing software or offering consulting in digital services.

Findings show that companies primarily use AI to enhance the existing abilities of salespeople and increase efficiency by automating repetitive tasks. In an international context, AI was often used similarly as in domestic settings. Additionally, in international sales, AI was used for market analysis, localisation, and customer engagement. However, challenges such as limited resources, integration into existing systems, and resistance to change slow down widescale adoption in the companies. Despite these obstacles, interviewees express optimism about AI's future role in B2B sales.

The research complements the existing literature by providing information on practical experiences and perspectives on AI deployment. The managerial implications highlight the importance of strategic thinking in the adoption of AI, differentiation from competitors and continuous learning to achieve long-term benefits. For example, companies should prepare for the impact of wider adoption of AI and consider which stages of the sales process AI will have the greatest impact on. In addition, due to their availability, easily accessible AI tools cannot create a unique competitive advantage. Companies must strategically assess, for example, the differentiation of sales material produced by generative AI in a market where competitors can produce similar content.

The process of AI adoption is largely comparable to the introduction of other new technologies. Efficient implementation emphasises the time available for learning new things, perceived ease of use and communicating the benefits to the end user. Special attention was paid to the integration of AI tools into existing systems, which was felt to significantly increase utilisation.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, internationalisation, business-to-business commerce, digitalisation

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
School of Marketing and Communication
Author: Sami Kailio
Title of the Thesis: AI in the B2B sales process of international SMEs
Degree: Master of Science in Economic and Business Administration
Programme: International Business
Supervisor: Arto Ojala
Year: 2024 **Sivumäärä:** 65

ABSTRACT:

Tekoälyn käyttö on tullut pk-yrityksille helpommin saataville viime vuosina. Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee tekoälyn käyttöönottoa ja hyödyntämistä kansainvälisesti toimivissa suomalaisissa pk-yrityksissä B2B-myynnin näkökulmasta. Tekoälyn nykyisiä hyötyjä ja haasteita sekä sitä, millaisia työkaluja käytetään, selvitetään kuuden yrityksen myyntijohtajien laadullisilla haastatteluilla. Haastatellut yritykset toimivat digitaalisilla toimialoilla joko kehittäen ohjelmistoja tai tarjoten asiantuntijapalveluita digitaaliseen liiketoimintaan liittyen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että yritykset käyttävät tekoälyä ensisijaisesti myyjien olemassa olevien kykyjen parantamiseen ja tehokkuuden lisäämiseen automatisoimalla toistuvia tehtäviä. Kansainvälisessä kontekstissa tekoälyä käytettiin usein samalla tavalla kuin kotimaisissa ympäristöissä. Lisäksi kansainvälisessä myynnissä tekoälyä hyödynnettiin markkina-analyysiin, lokalisointiin ja kommunikointiin. Haasteet, kuten rajalliset resurssit, integraatiot olemassa oleviin järjestelmiin ja muutosvastarinta, hidastavat kuitenkin laajamittaista käyttöönottoa yrityksissä. Näistä esteistä huolimatta haastateltavat suhtautuvat optimistisesti tekoälyn tulevaan rooliin B2B-myynnissä.

Tutkimus täydentää olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta tarjoamalla tietoa käytännön kokemuksista ja näkökulmia tekoälyn käyttöönottoon. Tutkimuksen käytännön merkitys ja päätöksentekoehdotukset korostavat strategisen ajattelun merkitystä tekoälyn käyttöönotossa, erottautumista kilpailijoista ja jatkuvaa oppimista pitkän aikavälin hyötyjen saavuttamiseksi. Yritysten tulisi esimerkiksi valmistautua tekoälyn laajemman käyttöönoton vaikutuksiin ja pohtia mihin myynnin prosessin vaiheisiin tekoälyllä on suurimmat tehostavat merkitykset. Lisäksi helposti saatavilla olevat tekoälytyökalut eivät voi saatavuutensa takia luoda uniikkia kilpailuetua itsessään vaan yritysten tulee strategisesti arvioida esimerkiksi generatiivisen tekoälyn tuottaman myyntimateriaalin erottautuvuutta markkinassa, jossa kilpailijoiden on mahdollista tuottaa vastaavaa sisältöä.

Suurilta osin tekoälyn käyttöönoton prosessi on verrattavissa muiden uusien teknologioiden käyttöönottoon. Tehokkaassa käyttöönotossa korostuu käytettävissä oleva aika uuden opetteluun, koettu käytön helppous ja hyötyjen kommunikointi loppukäyttäjälle. Erityistä huomiota annettiin tekoäly työkalujen integroitavuudelle olemassa oleviin järjestelmiin, jonka koettiin merkittävästi lisäävän käyttöä.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, internationalisation, business-to-business commerce, digitalisation

Contents

Figures

Tables

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in AI tools serving multiple purposes and industries. According to a prediction by Gartner (2023), AI-aided sales solutions will be added to traditional sales playbooks in 75% of B2B sales organisations by 2025. On a wider scale, the shift to new technologies merging physical, digital, and biological realities is often referred to as the fourth industrial revolution (Marr, 2016). The new technology, including machine learning and AI, enables computers to make reliable conclusions to help decision-making processes (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 145).

According to Syam & Sharma (2018, p. 145), AI technology is currently utilised as a supportive tool in sales to complete repetitive tasks to make the sales process more efficient. They assert that AI can help sales teams understand complex buying processes to avoid potential barriers in the future of B2B sales. Furthermore, they assert that AI can help identify potential buyers and formulate appealing offerings based on data.

Many authors (see Syam & Sharma 2018; Paschen, Wilson & Ferreira 2020) state that AI is set to fundamentally change processes in B2B sales as AI is considered to enhance sales teams by taking over certain tasks. Paschen et al. (2020, p. 412) consider the challenge for executives to be identifying the contributions AI might bring to their sales team. Chang (2022, p. 249) proposes that AI and human salespersons can serve the buyer the best in different stages of the buyer-seller relationship. However, Chang notes that this division in labour is yet to be tested empirically and therefore needs to be applied cautiously. Furthermore, they suggest future research on the possible golden ratio between humans and AI in sales organisations. Rapp & Beeler (2021, p. 37) assert that the fast-moving field of sales still has many gaps in the existing research. They further conclude that the emergence of sales technology and AI further change the landscape of sales calling for additional research.

The cost of digital innovation and AI are decreasing which makes it possible for an increasing number of SMEs to start using them in their internationalisation (Denicolai et

al., 2021). In addition, the readiness of SMEs to use AI positively impacts their performance in internationalisation (Denicolai et al., 2021). However, they note that during their research, wide-scale utilisation of AI among SMEs was still a distant future and was limited by resources, readiness level, and strategic orientation. Since then, the number of easily available AI tools has seen a massive increase and AI utilisation has become a realistic possibility for SMEs. Currently, the field of AI tools is fragmented and there are many service providers. Bureau (2023) has identified 4,000 separate AI tools with 86 of them specifically designed for sales. The field is evolving rapidly and up-to-date research on how international SMEs use AI in their B2B sales process has not been conducted in Finland.

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the study

This study aims to research the impact of AI, on B2B sales in Finnish international SMEs. The research will examine how the companies are adopting and utilising AI in their sales processes. The thesis will also examine the challenges and opportunities that arise from the implementation of AI in B2B sales, and how SMEs are adapting to these changes along with their willingness to adapt. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the potential of AI in enhancing sales and internationalisation for Finnish SMEs and answer the research question:

How do Finnish international SMEs use AI in B2B sales?

Objectives:

1. What are the challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of AI in B2B sales for Finnish international SMEs?
2. In what stages of the sales process is AI used?
3. What tasks can AI be used to perform?
4. Provide recommendations and best practices for Finnish international SMEs in adopting and utilising AI effectively in their B2B sales processes.

1.2 Further delimitations of the study

The study will focus on the adoption and utilisation of AI in B2B sales processes and international sales in Finnish SMEs. Considering the potential differences associated with organisational size, the study aims to provide insights and recommendations specifically tailored to SMEs. The examination of larger corporations' experiences is excluded to provide a more targeted analysis of SMEs' needs and opportunities in the B2B sales context.

The study was conducted during the spring of 2024, and the findings reflect the state of AI adoption in B2B sales processes by Finnish international SMEs at that point in time. Long-term trends or future developments in AI adoption are not fully captured which offers grounds for future study. However, this study reveals future outlook at the current time provided by the interviewees.

The study relies on sources and data available in English or Finnish. Insights from sources in other languages are limited, potentially leading to language bias in a rapidly evolving landscape. However, given the nature of the field of AI and its focus on English, the topic is covered in sufficient detail.

2 Theoretical background

The research will be grounded in relevant theories and research related to the B2B sales process, internationalisation, and technology adoption. These themes will be covered from the perspective of AI, highlighting the opportunities and challenges its implementation brings.

2.1 AI in B2B sales process

AI is rapidly evolving and needs to be defined to purposefully examine this study's results and understand the phenomenon. Defining AI allows for limiting the use of other technologies outside the scope of this study. This delimitation is important since many technologies claim to be AI-based when they are not. This is referred to as "AI-washing" by Bini (2018, p. 2359), who defines it as the practice of tagging software as AI even when it consists of basic algorithms. They further assert that this trend is driven by the excitement around AI and the perception that it can add value to many products and services. However, it can be misleading to users who may believe they are using actual AI technology (Bini, 2018, p. 2359).

Haenlein & Kaplan, (2019, p. 5) describe AI (AI) as "a system's ability to interpret external data correctly, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation." According to many authors (see Fischer et al., 2022, p. 139; Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 145), there are numerous use cases for AI in B2B sales operations that cover every stage of the sales process, from prospecting to after-sales.

To grasp the stages in which AI technologies may be used and what they can achieve, the sales process of a B2B organisation must be defined. Dubinsky (1980, p. 32) identified seven steps of a sales process from the point of view of the sales team. These steps are (1) locating and prospecting for customers, (2) the pre-approach, (3) the approach, (4)

the sales presentation, (5) handling objections/sales resistance, (6) the close and (7) the post-sale follow-up. These steps have served as a base for sales organisations and following research up to this day. However, many researchers have identified evolved versions of these steps and produced new frameworks and changes to the original seven steps. These include Moncrief & Marshall (2005) who presented the evolved seven steps, focusing on the importance of relationships. Furthermore, Kadic-Maglajlic et al. (2021) identified cultural distinctions between these seven steps in their study of emerging markets, pointing out region-specific differences.

Furthermore, many authors have described that Dubinsky´s (1980) seven steps have been mixed and tailored to the demands of the businesses rather than being easily identifiable (see Rutherford & Matthews, 2023, p. 6; Fraccastoro et al., 2021, p. 6; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, p. 13). The seven steps are seen to have merged, however, retaining the original steps as parts of the new phases. This can be seen in research by Wengler et al. (2021) where they have limited the process to five steps. Furthermore, Fraccastoro et al. (2021, p. 4) refer to the three main phases of a sales process as identification of new business possibilities, persuasion, and relationship management. They argue that the change has been driven by new technologies available to sales teams allowing them to utilise data and conduct the sales process more efficiently. On the other hand, Rutherford and Matthews (2023, p. 6) propose a four-stage model to look at the sales process which includes: pre-interaction, the initial interaction, fit exploration and engagement, and relationship alignment and committed expansion. In Table 1, the summary of the different steps of the B2B sales process in the literature is presented. The authors are presented on the far left and the steps progress chronologically from left to right.

Table 1. B2B sales process in the literature.

Dubinsky, 1980	Locating and prospecting customers	The preapproach	Approach	The sales presentation	Handling objections/sales resistance	The close	The post-sale follow-up.
Fraccastoro, 2021	Identification of new business opportunities		Persuasion		Relationship management		
Rutherford & Matthews, 2023	Pre-interaction		The initial interaction		Fit exploration and engagement	Relationship alignment and committed expansion.	
Moncrief & Marshall, 2005	Customer retention and deletion	Database and knowledge management	Nurturing the relationship	Marketing the product	Problem-solving	Adding value/satisfying needs	Customer relationship maintenance
Wengler et al., 2021	Market analysis	Selection of target customers and lead generation		Negotiation	Business transaction		After-sales

In conclusion of the review of the B2B sales process, it can be stated that the models largely follow a similar path. The differences arise on whether the steps should be completed in order, and on the classification and grouping of different stages. Therefore, this paper will look at the sales process through a five-step approach which combines the most relevant phases of the existing theories, namely: Demand estimation, lead generation, approaching the leads, presentation & closing, and after-sales.

Another approach to the progress of sales is the development of the buyer-seller relationship presented by Dwyer et al. (1987, p. 15). The model looks at sales as a two-sided relationship consisting of five phases: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution. This approach can be used to evaluate the needs of the buyer and how the seller should address them. Chang (2022, p. 246) has developed a framework using

Dwyer´s approach and that will be used to evaluate how AI compares with human salespeople in different stages of the buyer-seller relationship in section 2.2.6.

2.2 Opportunities and advantages of AI in B2B sales

Previously, automation and technology in sales have mostly been used in standard and repeatable actions (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 145). However, they see it possible that in the future technology will be most importantly used to understand customer behaviour and develop highly customised offerings. This section explores the current opportunities and use cases of AI in different parts of the B2B sales process. The structure follows the sales process defined in section 2.1. It is important to note that the field is quickly evolving, and new use cases and tools are made available constantly.

2.2.1 Demand estimation

It is important to understand the demand and the potential in the market to analyse the possibilities the company has. Zhang & Song (2022, p. 70) found that companies that are highly market-orientated outperform their competitors in growth, financial performance, customer satisfaction, market share, and innovation success. Market orientation refers to the creation of market intelligence throughout the whole organisation to comprehend present and future customer demands, as well as the distribution of that knowledge in the organisation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990, p. 3). Companies using AI are able to be more efficient and become more market-orientated therefore gaining a competitive advantage against their peers (Zhang & Song, 2022, p. 70).

Furthermore, to accurately predict sales, a company should conduct an up-to-date sales forecast which predicts how much the company will sell. This is especially important since accurate forecasting allows companies to better manage their inventory, place their resources, and make financial decisions and (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 141). They further assert that AI can help companies achieve these goals by interpreting

data. Furthermore, the use of AI in sales forecasting allows companies to identify the most profitable customers and the products that are in demand. Therefore, sales forecasting can be seen as a part of the larger function of customer and product development (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 141).

2.2.2 Lead generation and qualification

Research has shown that machine learning and AI can be used to reduce the time needed by salespeople to qualify leads and also to increase the quality of the leads (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 142). B2B companies need to have set qualifications for potential customers they can and/or want to have as customers. The qualifications can for example be based on financial metrics, industry characteristics, or location. Overall, qualifying leads tells if the leads are able to buy and if they are likely to buy (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 142). Efficiently generating leads that match these qualifications is important for companies as the number of qualified leads increases the potential revenue.

Another AI-powered tool in B2B sales is chatbots that can be integrated into company websites. According to Kaushal & Yadav (2023, p. 1), a sophisticated chatbot increases efficiency in the customer journey and helps qualify the leads. Furthermore, they assert that the AI behind the chatbots can answer complex questions in natural language and can be trained for specific industries. In addition, chatbots allow salespeople to take over in real-time to discuss with customers when a human is needed to take the deal forward. Utilising chatbots also crosses over to the approach stage since chatbots can be used to offer relevant information and answer frequently asked questions that the potential customer typically has in the early stages of the buying process (Hildebrand & Bergner, 2019). According to Chalmers et al. (2021, p. 1040), this integration of AI chatbots has implications beyond customer interaction. They assert that it shows potential for reduction of marginal costs in scaling as the need for human labour decreases offering a scalable solution for businesses without reliance on increasing employee costs. However, they note that especially customers of smaller companies may face feelings of

inauthenticity as they might expect a personal connection with small companies (Chalmers et al., 2021, p. 1039).

2.2.3 Approaching the leads

After the leads are generated and qualified, AI can determine the best time to contact the prospect along with how it would be most beneficial to contact them (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 142). An example of tools that help companies approach potential clients at the right time is 6sense. They provide information which helps salespeople to prioritise the right accounts and better utilise their limited time (6sense, 2023). These types of services analyse web traffic and use analytics and AI to suggest actions for human salespeople. The information can be connected to the company CRM system to provide the information in real-time.

Another approach is enhancing traditional methods with AI. A typical practice for B2B sales companies is to use sales development representatives (SDRs) to book appointments for the sales teams through cold calls (Care & Bohlig, 2008, p. 26). Companies like Cience are offering to outsource cold calls by utilising AI bots. This involves making cold calls based on data and the pitch given by the sales organisation. According to Cience (2023), AI can also answer questions from the prospect which adds to the value of the technology and improves the quality of booked meetings. After a successful conversation with the prospect, the AI sets up a meeting for the salesperson to meet with the prospect. The AI also gives the salesperson a summary of the conversation and access to the recording to prepare for the meeting (Cience, 2023).

2.2.4 Presentation & closing

According to Syam and Sharma (2018, p. 144) salespeople are often responsible for making pricing decisions based on the conversations with the buyers. They assert that AI can be used in both designing the offer and in pricing. AI can also be used to effectively create

personalised visual presentations for the meetings to help the sales team appeal to the potential client (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 144).

According to Syam & Sharma (2018, p. 144), it seems likely that the closing and objection handling stage will need the most involvement by the human salespeople. They furthermore assert that AI can handle simpler and standard orders but in the context of complex B2B solution selling salespeople have a significant role in the closing stage. By using AI in the earlier stages of the process, companies can utilise the time of the salespeople more efficiently by allowing them to focus on more complex cases and the closing stage (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 144).

2.2.5 After-sales

After-sales functions typically consist of continuous involvement with the customer to nurture the relationship and enable future sales (Care & Bohlig, 2008, p. 13). According to Fischer et al. (2022, p. 138), the entire order processing can be automated to free up time for the employees and to make sure that all the necessary tasks are completed following the procedure. According to Syam and Sharma (2018, p. 145) tracking the process with AI-enhanced features also enables the entire sales team to be updated on the delivery timeline. Furthermore, AI can notify of possibilities for upselling and cross-selling opportunities to increase the effectiveness of the sales team (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 145).

2.2.6 Buyer-seller relationship stages

This section compares AI and human salespeople in different stages of the buyer-seller relationship. These stages take place over the course of the above-covered five steps. This approach looks at the development of the sales process, focusing on how the engagement levels of both the selling and buying companies progressively intensify or diminish. Using this framework (see Figure 1), Chang (2022, p. 246) suggests that it is possible to evaluate if AI or human salespeople should be used to engage with the buyer.

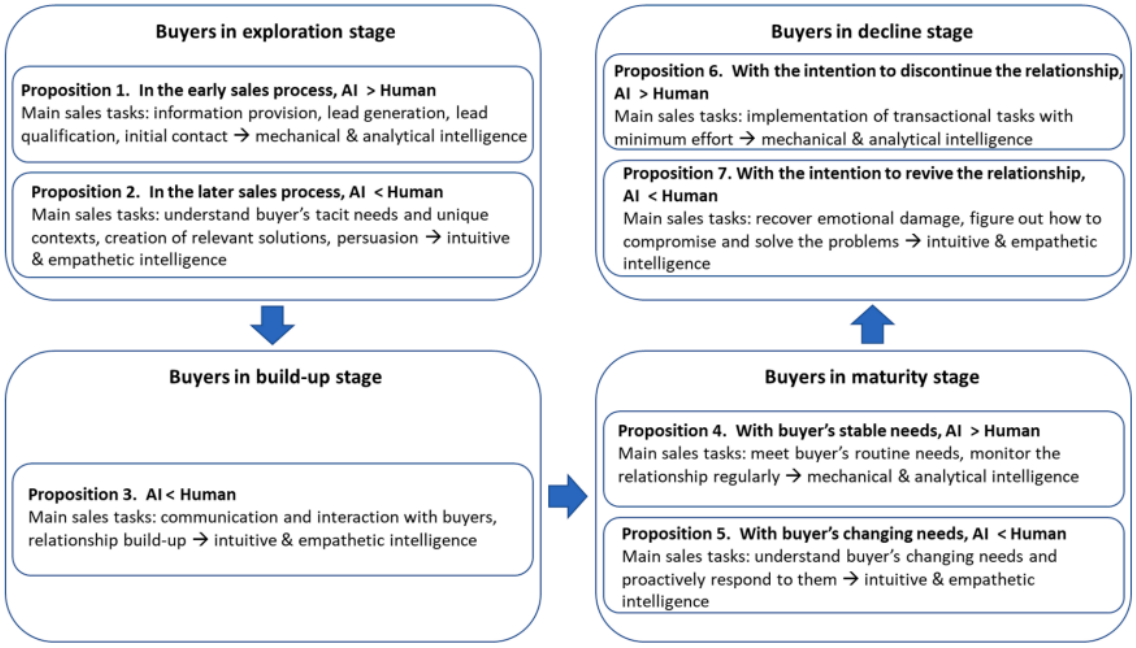

Figure 1. A seller´s buyer portfolio at one point in time (Chang, 2022, p. 246).

Exploration stage

By looking at the sales process through the buyer-seller relationship model by Dwyer et al. (1987), Chang (2022, p. 245) suggests that AI would be more efficient in carrying out the required tasks for buyers in the exploration stage in the early steps of the sales process. Chang proposes that buyers in the early steps of the sales process and the exploration stage need more information before moving further. Chang further asserts that this task can be performed by AI since it requires mechanical and analytical intelligence.

Buyers that are already further in the buying process steps but are in the exploration stage can be more efficiently handled by human salespeople (Chang, 2022, p. 245). In this situation, Chang proposes that intuitive and empathetic intelligence are needed to understand the buyer´s specific needs to create relevant solutions.

Build-up stage

Chang (2022, p. 247) proposes that buyers in the build-up stage should be managed by human salespeople. In this stage, the salesperson´s role is to build trust and understanding with the buyer requiring intuitive and empathetic intelligence.

Maturity stage

In cases when the buyer´s needs are stable, AI is capable of handling the client more effectively than a human salesperson (Chang, 2022, p. 247). In these types of situations, AI can analyse the routine needs of the buyer and monitor the relationship regularly. On the other hand, if the buyer's needs are changing human salesperson should be used (Chang, 2022, p. 247). Under these circumstances, the salesperson needs to understand the buyer's business and to be able to respond to them. This can be achieved through communication and dialogue which require the intuitive and empathetic intelligence of a human salesperson to act upon.

Decline stage

Buyers in the decline stage that the seller aims to discontinue the relationship with, can be addressed by AI (Chang, 2022, p. 248). In this stage, the tasks are transactional and require mechanical and analytical intelligence. As the relationship is going to end it should be handled with minimum effort gradually decreasing involvement. In contrast, if the aim is to revive the relationship a human salesperson is seen to be the best fit for the task (Chang, 2022, p. 248). Chang proposes that the intuitive and empathetic intelligence of humans can be used to find compromises and solve problems to revive the relationship.

2.3 Challenges in AI implementation

This section about challenges faced by companies when implementing AI in their sales processes provides an overview of the obstacles and difficulties that organizations may encounter. According to Wengler et al. (2021, p. 610), complex parts of business operations will require manual labour for the foreseeable future because of the high costs

associated with AI implementation. Even though the accessibility of AI applications is expanding for SMEs; their ability to act is still limited by their readiness levels, available resources, and the need for a strategic focus that guides priorities (Denicolai et al., 2021, p. 10). Overall, the challenges can vary depending on the specific industry, organization size, and the extent of AI implementation. The challenges can be divided into organizational, technological, and cultural (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 8).

2.3.1 Organizational challenges

According to a study by McKinsey & Company (2022, p. 14), organisations report that AI professionals are difficult to hire. The study found that the surveyed roles related to AI were found to be difficult to hire for by 59% to 79% of companies depending on the role. This is due to the newness of AI as a technology, limiting companies´ access to the amount of talent to use the technologies effectively. However, more recently McKinsey & Company (2023, p. 13) found that this number has slightly decreased over the last year, yet remains a significant constraint. This finding is supported by Ångström et. al (2023, p. 11) who found that a lack of trained employees is the greatest organizational challenge companies face in AI implementation. Furthermore, insufficiency in AI understanding among managers and customers is reported to be a challenge (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 11).

2.3.2 Technological challenges

Ångström et. al (2023, p. 9) found that a large number of technological challenges are linked to data. They conclude that businesses face difficulties with a lack of data, data being poorly organised for intended use, and inconsistent data definitions throughout the organisation. Furthermore, companies across a range of experiences in AI face these challenges. On the other hand, the more experienced companies face more challenges in fitting AI technologies to their custom needs (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 9). In the selection of AI tools companies newer to the technology are likely to choose more standardised options whereas experienced companies need the transparency of more

customisable tools. This comes down to the need for experienced companies to ensure regulatory compliance as they push new boundaries (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 9).

In their State of Sales study of over 7700 respondents, Salesforce (2022, p. 16) found that sales teams use an average of 10 tools to close deals. The study also found that approximately two-thirds of salespeople felt overwhelmed by the number of sales tools their organisation uses to close deals. According to the study the number of tools could increase since many companies report also planning to implement AI tools. To solve the challenge of salespeople feeling overwhelmed 9 out of 10 companies are planning to integrate their tools to revolve around the most used systems (Salesforce, 2022, p. 16).

2.3.3 Cultural challenges

Ångström et. al (2023, p. 5) found that businesses also face cultural challenges. They suggest that the most frequent instances are the combination of many employee worries and concerns about AI including loss of autonomy, loss of knowledge, and job loss. Furthermore, due to inertia and a perceived generational divide in technological knowledge employees might feel threatened or want to stick with familiar ways of work (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 11). These challenges are more visible in companies that are new to AI technologies as they are seen to lack the data-driven mindset that is needed for the transformation (Ångström et al., 2023, p. 11).

The technology acceptance model by Venkatesh & Davis (2000, p. 186) suggests that the willingness to use a new system is based on perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. The perceived ease of use in turn is described to be influenced by multiple variables such as job relevance and output quality. Managers implementing and AI companies developing new technologies need to consider these causes for resistance to successfully start the utilisation of AI in an organisation. In addition to resistance to change, Paschen et al. (2020, p. 412) state that it is likely that employees will be doubtful of AI as it may cause fears of replacing jobs.

2.4 International sales and AI

Internationalisation has long been studied and multiple theories have been presented. Welch and Luostarinen (1988, p. 36) describe internationalisation as “The process of increasing involvement in international operations”. According to Ahi et al., (2017, p. 1) one of the most crucial choices an internationalising SME must make is which international market to enter, along with the market entry mode selection. Therefore, this section covers how SMEs go international from the perspective of SME B2B sales, focusing on entering new markets and picking the right ones. Based on this information, an understanding of how utilising AI can influence this process and international B2B sales is provided.

According to Rutherford and Matthews (2023, p. 12), international sales differ from domestic sales in four key areas. Firstly, the stages of the sales process are typically longer. Secondly, there is an increased need to understand the buyer's organisational hierarchy and culture. Thirdly, the need to build trust and relationships is highlighted. Finally, they emphasise the importance of the limitations set by different languages. Previous research suggests that AI can increase understanding of new environments and simulate complex buyer organisations to help salespeople predict obstacles (Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 145). Furthermore, AI chatbots can help give feedback on sales presentations and their effectiveness prior to meetings (Singh et al., 2019, p. 5) therefore facilitating culturally customised interactions. Also, language barriers can be tackled with AI, and this trend is expected to continue in the future as many AI projects are underway to ease cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication in Europe (Rehm et al., 2020, p. 3322).

2.4.1 International market selection and AI

Johanson and Vahlne (2009, p. 1420) highlight gradual and experiential learning in the internationalisation process. They emphasise the importance of market knowledge, incremental commitment to new markets and the role of learning and networking. In

practice, companies can manage their internationalisation by starting in countries with low psychic distance from their home market and incrementally increasing their commitments to the markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1426). On the other hand, companies may be born global and start selling abroad quickly after the inception of the company without requiring extra effort (Hennart, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, according to Musso and Francioni (2014, p. 308), SMEs often approach international market selection and entry mode selection non-systematically or without logic. This is driven by limited resources and expertise that are needed for a systematic approach (Musso & Francioni, 2014, p. 308).

Ahi et al. (2017, p. 16) emphasise the importance of collecting crucial information for profitable internationalisation and market selection decisions for SMEs. However, they note that collecting such information is challenging. On the other hand, Neubert (2018, p. 45) highlights that AI can help collect such data and asserts that AI can be used in forecasting the future value of international markets therefore providing potential solutions to the non-systematic approach of SMEs reported by Musso and Francioni (2014, p. 308). Fish and Ruby (2009, p. 78) found that AI models can be used with limited resources at low cost even by small companies. More accurate forecasts will boost the effectiveness of market selection as well as the chance to take part in future market growth (Neubert, 2018, p. 45). Arshi et al. (2022, p. 536) found that AI models can be used to predict the success of the internationalisation of companies. AI models allow companies to increase their success in international markets by reducing risks, learning time, and efforts associated with early-stage internationalisation (Arshi et al., 2022, p. 536). Furthermore, AI can help managers make entry location decisions by analysing financial leverage and geographical distance (Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 9).

The study conducted by Kinkel et al. (2023, p. 10) shows that AI can help industrial companies make decisions when thinking about moving production to different locations. If moving production abroad is considered, various AI applications can improve collaboration and operations (Kinkel et al., 2023, p. 10). They further assert that when considering

bringing production back to the home country, it is important to focus on the use of AI in decision-making processes. Furthermore, to make the best use of AI, companies should invest in developing the digital skills of their employees (Kinkel et al., 2023, p. 10).

2.4.2 Entry mode selection

An international market entry mode refers to the organisational structure that allows the introduction of a company's products, technology, human expertise, management, or other resources into a foreign country (Root, 1998, p. 5). Root further asserts that to gain long-term benefits from entering new markets, companies should approach internationalisation through systematic entry modes rather than merely relying on a sales-orientated approach that emphasises immediate sales. According to Root (1998, p. 6) entry modes can be classified into three categories: export, contractual, and investment entry modes.

The increasing digitalisation has allowed SMEs to operate their businesses remotely by giving access to more market information, cutting costs and speeding up processes through better interaction (Hervé et al., 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, new technologies allow SMEs to conduct business in markets that were not reachable before (Fraccastoro et al., 2021, p. 2). Denicolai et al. (2021, p. 1) assert that the digital transformation has given SMEs options to grow internationally and use digital entry modes to internationalise their sales operations. They emphasise the role of digitalisation in internationalisation especially for SMEs and suggest that AI can help them manage their limited resources in the internationalisation process (Denicolai et al., 2021, p. 10).

SMEs must understand the differences between employing resources acquired internally and externally in various entry modes, as well as the alternatives available to them for acquiring essential resources based on the entry mode they choose (Lindsay et al., 2017, p. 141). Furthermore, they found that companies using direct exporting, representative offices, and joint venture entry modes, should recognise the dependence on internal resources. On the other hand, companies using agents and distributors can rely on

external resources (Lindsay et al., 2017, p. 141). AI can aid the process of assessing country risks and analysing existing resources, making it useful for the market entry choice methods selection, especially when deciding on foreign direct investment (Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, AI could enhance management capabilities reducing costs in areas such as supply chain management and inventory control. Additionally, AI can also help in export prediction supporting forecasting international competitiveness and performance (Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, big data analytics allows companies to observe the changing situations in foreign markets remotely without committing significant resources (Strange & Zucchella, 2017, p. 176).

3 Research Design

In this chapter, the research design, an explanation for the selection of the research methods as well as the data-gathering methods and data-analysis techniques are presented. Additionally, the validity and reliability of the research are also discussed.

3.1 Methodological approach

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p. 5), qualitative research is focused on gaining a better understanding and interpreting. In contrast, statistical analysis, hypothesis testing, and explanation are the focus of quantitative techniques. In addition, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the topic, qualitative research methods pay attention to the social and cultural environment when gathering and analysing data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 5). As this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and interpret it, a qualitative research approach is selected. Semi-structured interviews with sales leaders from Finnish international SMEs were conducted to gather the data. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, ensuring the interviewees' understanding and possible input on the subject. The data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and gain an understanding of the phenomenon related to the research objectives.

An interview is selected as the research method since the research area is not well covered and it is difficult to know the direction of the answers (Hirsijärvi & Hurme, 2022, Chapter 3.1). Furthermore, an interview allows for asking clarifying questions which further help understand the complex phenomenon (Hirsijärvi & Hurme, 2022, Chapter 3.1). Overall, obtaining rich, empirical data through interviews is an effective method, particularly when the topic is episodic and infrequent (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 28).

Qualitative research does not aim at statistical generalisations but instead aims to describe a phenomenon or event, understand a certain action or give a theoretically

meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, Chapter 3.4). Therefore, this study aims to explore the phenomenon, provide practical descriptions and insightful interpretations of the interviewees' experiences.

3.2 Case selection and data collection

The selection criteria for the case companies were the following:

1) They are Finnish SMEs.
2) They have internationalised their business.
3) Their customers are other businesses and not consumers.
4) They use AI in their sales process.
5) The interviewee works in a leading role in their sales operation.

Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are defined in the EU as companies with fewer than 250 employees and annual revenue and/or annual balance sheet of no more than 50 million euros (European Commission, 2020, p. 11). Micro enterprises have less than 10 employees and a maximum annual revenue and/or annual balance sheet of 2 million euros, while small enterprises have less than 50 employees their annual revenue and/or annual balance sheet does not exceed 10 million euros (European Commission, 2020, p. 11). Medium-sized enterprises include those that have more employees and higher revenue than small businesses but still fit the overall SME category.

Overall, 6 companies were selected, and one interview was conducted with each of them. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, Chapter 3.4), six interviewees is a good amount for thesis data. The interviewees work in a leading role in the companies` sales operations with titles such as head sales, CEO, or country manager. The interviewees are referred to as I1-I6 and the information about the companies and interviews is provided in Table 2. The names or names of the companies of the interviewees are not presented to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

Table 2. Information on the companies and the interviews.

Abbreviation in text	Industry	Turnover (2022) (mil. EUR)	Number of employees (2022)	Title of interviewee	Duration of interview (min)
I1.	Computer programming activities	0,66	8	Chief executive officer	25
I2.	Computer programming activities	6,2	61	Country manager	27
I3.	Agents specialised in the sale of particular products	0,69	11	Chief executive officer	39
I4.	Computer programming activities	2,1	21	Chief revenue officer	30
I5.	Business and other management consultancy activities	4	40	Head of Sales	34
I6.	Other software publishing	7,2	50	Head of Sales	27

The case companies all operate in digital industries either selling their software or consulting and implementing strategies related to digital tools. The type of business plays a role in their high interest towards AI. This can be seen for example in the following comment:

> *"We produce software for customers. Of course, we need to be on the crest of a wave in a way" (I4.).*

The preliminary idea for recruiting the participant companies was to find them through Finnish sales networks and groups on LinkedIn. The networks have an increasing number of active members and AI is one of the most popular subjects in public discussion

between the members. Finding suitable case companies was therefore seen as likely. Another avenue for recruiting participants was to research various company websites.

One of the case companies was recruited via a public post on the most active Finnish sales professional group on LinkedIn. The group was selected as a potential avenue to find suitable companies since at the time of planning the research it had over 1000 active members that work in Finnish B2B sales. Furthermore, AI had been discussed in the group on multiple occasions and therefore it was evident that the group had members with experience on the research subject.

The other five case companies were recruited by connecting with the identified sales leaders on LinkedIn and sending them direct messages. Relevant case companies were found by searching LinkedIn posts with relevant search terms such as “AI”, “Sales”, and “Internationalisation” both in Finnish and English. Another method was to find companies offering sales enablement tools and CRM systems and study their reference customers. These reference companies were thought to be open-minded towards new technologies and therefore more likely to use AI in their sales process. The companies found with these methods were compared against the selection criteria and the sales leaders of the fitting companies were identified through company websites and LinkedIn.

Furthermore, two companies were contacted via phone calls since their sales leaders were not on LinkedIn. These companies both operated in manufacturing industries. After discussion, the companies were found to not use AI in their sales processes and therefore further formal interviews were not scheduled. However, the researcher was prepared for this outcome and asked predetermined questions to gain insight into why AI was yet to be implemented in these companies. This information is not covered in the findings chapter and is only used as a base for future research suggestions.

The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams to lower the barrier to participating in the study for the company representatives. Furthermore, this made it possible to find

suitable companies and interviewees without geographical restrictions which increased the number of possible case companies. Since the interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, it was possible to record them and use the automatically generated transcriptions. Any errors in the transcriptions were corrected by going over the recordings before analysing the texts. The length of the interviews varied between 25 and 40 minutes with the average length being 30 minutes. The length depended on the individual talkativeness of the interviewees. Overall, the interviews provided a great amount of data with the transcriptions combining to a total of about 22 000 words.

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected in the semi-structured interviews was coded using inductive coding. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83) inductive coding is a ground-up approach in which the data is coded without attempting to fit the data into predetermined categories but rather the themes being identified from the data. This method was selected because it can provide new and unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83) as is the goal of this study. Overall, six main categories were identified, and they are discussed in chapter 4.

The data collected and categorised with inductive coding was analysed using thematic analysis methods. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) is a method used to analyse, and report patterns known as themes within data. They assert that thematic analysis offers flexibility in its application to various research contexts, allowing researchers to adapt the method to suit the specific needs of their study. In practice, the categorised data was analysed by seeking out similarities and differences between the interviews in each category. To make this process systematic the coded data was formatted into a Word file with the interviews being next to each other according to a method presented by Kriukow (2020).

3.4 Validity and reliability

Validity refers to whether the research design accurately measures what it is designed to measure (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 215). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p. 306), validity in qualitative research is the goal of assuring that the description or report is accurate. Validity has been considered in the findings chapter. The answers have been recorded accurately and direct quotes have been used to describe the experiences of companies to present the interviewees' views to the reader as accurately as possible. In addition, the responses have been constantly returned to during the writing of the findings chapter to be processed as accurately as possible. In addition, the reader can easily confirm the findings of the research since the interviewees have been referred to by the tags I1-I6. Furthermore, the analysis process has been clearly described.

Thematic analysis is a valuable qualitative research method but can face pitfalls (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). One common challenge is the failure to conduct thorough data analysis, resulting in a mere collection of extracts without a meaningful analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). They further suggest that extracts should serve to support broader analytic points and help interpret the data's significance. Another pitfall is mistaking data collection questions for themes, ignoring the necessary analytical process of identifying patterns and making sense of responses across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). These pitfalls underscore the importance of thorough analytic work to ensure the validity and depth of thematic analysis in research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 95).

The reliability of the study must also be considered in the research design. According to Saunders et al. (2023, p. 215), the reliability of a study consists of internal and external reliability. They assert that maintaining consistency during the research is referred to as internal reliability, while external reliability describes whether the methods for gathering data and analysing it would provide consistent results if repeated or if another researcher were to reproduce them. These factors have been taken into account in the research design ensuring the reliability of the study.

4 Findings and discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the study and answers the research question: How do Finnish international SMEs use AI in B2B sales?

First, the use of AI in different stages of the sales process is covered followed by an analysis of what type of AI tools were used. Next, the benefits and practical functions are presented after which the arising challenges are discussed. Following this, AI is considered in the context of international sales. Finally, an overview of the future outlook on AI is presented.

The general attitudes of the interviewees towards AI were positive, interested, and optimistic with some also mentioning healthy scepticism. This can be seen for example in the following answers of the interviewees describing their attitude towards AI:

> *“Interested and enthusiastic in principle, of course, with some reservations at the same time.” (I1.)*
>
> *“Well, of course, I'm very open to it.” (I2.)*
>
> *"Every self-respecting and job-interested salesperson should hold a very favourable attitude towards these productivity-boosting AI solutions." (I3.)*
>
> *“I'm open to it, but I'm by no means the one who first rushes to try everything new, so, I probably feel that I'm reasonably sceptical about artificial intelligence as well.” (I4.)*
>
> *“Well, isn't it this new industrial revolution and it will make the work significantly more efficient. For some, it means that they will do their work more efficiently, and for some, it means that there will be no work as it has been until now.” (I5.)*
>
> *“Speeds up and changes the way of work in everyday life and enables a lot.” (I6.)*

The interviewees were also asked to provide information about the general attitude in their companies towards AI and the answers were similar to their personal views. The

companies' industries were seen as an important driver towards the company's interest in AI as the case companies operate in digital industries. On the other hand, some mentioned differences between employees and had noticed that people in more technical roles were more likely to be interested in AI. Furthermore, personalities and interest towards new technologies were seen to have an impact on the attitude of individual salespeople.

4.1 AI in different stages of the sales process

As also found in the literature review (see Fischer et al., 2022, p. 140; Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 135), the case companies had used AI across the sales process. Overall, the case companies had found use cases for AI in demand estimation, prospecting, contacting, preparation, and negotiation stages. There were clear differences between different stages, and some had more use cases than others. The interviewees indicated that they view AI as most useful in the early stages of the process because those tasks typically require repetitive manual labour. This finding is supported by Chang (2022, p. 245) who proposes that the early-stage functions require mechanical and analytical intelligence and should therefore be performed by AI. Furthermore, the activities that AI was used for were more often internal tasks rather than customer interaction. The framework by Chang (2022, p. 246) further supports this finding as well since the interaction is described to require intuitive and empathetic intelligence. However, as in the process described in Figure 2, use cases had been found across the process and also in customer interactions.

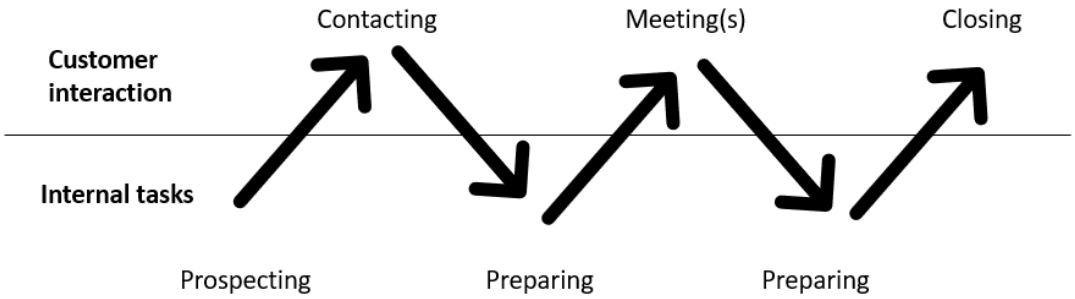

Figure 2. Sales process divided into customer interactions and internal tasks.

The case companies revealed that they use AI for prospecting. Prospecting was described as having been made more efficient and many tools were reportedly available. However, in some of the tools it was unclear what is artificial intelligence and what was just tacked on AI label. Furthermore, it was not believed that AI could completely replace humans in prospecting but rather increase the abilities of humans. For example, AI had been used to find companies similar to existing customers. In connection with prospecting, it was also mentioned that AI could be used to collect relevant data that the salespeople would like to know before contacting. However, this was viewed as expensive or time-consuming to set up and therefore had not been implemented.

The companies also mentioned using generative AI to enhance content production. The content was largely described as having been used in the contacting stage and during the negotiation. For example, the companies had used AI to draft sales messages or ease writing emails. An example of a function that the case companies had identified as a possibility to use generative AI but decided not to, was making sales decks. The companies did not believe that AI could produce better quality than humans in this function and therefore had not invested in this function. This was the case despite some interviewees having encountered impressive AI-generated or enhanced sales decks of other companies.

Most of the companies mentioned having tried taking notes of sales meetings with AI. They also used AI to summarise the notes to better understand what had been discussed.

These summaries could then be used to prepare for the next meeting or to make proposals.

Some of the interviewees also utilised AI at the end of the sales process. One interviewee described the ability of AI to increase salespeople's ability to answer customers' technical questions during the contract phase, allowing technical experts and lawyers to be used more efficiently because the salesperson could independently take the process further. This finding aligns with Paschen et al. (2020, p. 412) who emphasise that AI will enhance the abilities of salespeople. The framework by Chang (2022, p. 246) suggests that this stage could be handled more effectively by human salespeople and it is an interesting notion that companies have found ways to combine the intuitive and empathetic intelligence of humans with the mechanical and analytical intelligence of AI.

4.2 AI tools used in B2B sales

The case companies had used a wide range of AI tools. Overall, the tools received praise and criticism across the interviews. Furthermore, the companies showed interest in experimenting and exploring the vast number of options. A key finding was that most of the companies had at least tried multiple different tools, some of which served the same function. It was also typical that the use of some tools was discontinued quickly after inexpensive or free trials. This happened due to the tool not meeting standards or the company wanting to try different alternatives.

The tools can be divided into two categories: independent and integrated. The independent tools function outside existing systems such as CRM. The most mentioned example of independent tools by the case companies was ChatGPT which was used for numerous tasks. The integrated tools function as an advanced feature within the existing systems. Some examples mentioned were AI tools of CRM systems such as Pipedrive and Salesforce.

Overall, the integrated tools were or would have been preferred over independent tools for their functionality and ease of use. However, they were also often more expensive and therefore had not always been implemented. Independent tools were described as taking time to get salespeople to start using them and interrupting the flow of work since they require switching between multiple systems. On the other hand, independent tools were described to be cheaper and easily accessible to try. Also, the case companies acknowledged that there were vast amounts of options available, and they could not and did not want to try everything.

Furthermore, companies were not always sure how some of the tools used AI or if there was AI used. This happened due to "AI washing" (Bini, 2018) that the companies had noticed with some software solutions. In these cases, the word "AI" had felt tacked on and was seen more likely to be something else. There was also often no understanding of what function AI played in the tool as shown in the following comment:

> *"I'm sure there's AI in the background on how the tools filter results and what they find, but I can't say exactly how artificial intelligence is utilised there, but certainly to some extent." (I2.)*

Overall, the use of different tools can be described as diverse with some similarities arising. The companies mentioned multiple individual tools and there were many named only by singular companies. However, the common nominator was that the tools aimed to increase efficiency in often similar functions. Furthermore, across the case companies there was a common emphasis on favouring independent tools over integrated tools due to price. This was likely related to the fact that the case companies are SMEs and are more likely to have smaller budgets than bigger companies. Contrary to the fact of actually using more independent tools, most of the companies would have preferred a higher level of integration if it had been possible.

4.3 Benefits and functions of AI in B2B sales

As described in section 4.1, the case companies had used AI in multiple different stages of the sales process. This section builds on that understanding and elaborates on the benefits and specific functions of AI. The analysis of benefits the case companies have gained highlights the significant impact of AI integration on sales processes. The benefits can be divided into 2 main categories: (1) time efficiency and productivity, and (2) learning and ability enhancement. Under these two categories, specific use cases are identified. For the first category, there were functions such as automating repetitive tasks, finding new ideas, and handling data. The functions for the second category included tasks related to language, communication, content creation and personalisation.

Most of the identified benefits were related to improving existing processes and increasing productivity. All case companies mentioned that AI had been used to complete or help with repetitive tasks that would otherwise have to be done manually. For example, one of the interviewees described that they could find relevant prospects almost twice as fast with the help of AI compared to without:

> *"Without AI, I can find X good prospects in an hour, so maybe it will almost double then and it can be transferred quite directly into money as well." (I5.)*

AI was also used to analyse data and to make summaries. This functionality was utilised in a variety of cases, such as analysing customer surveys, summing up email threads, and processing sales meeting notes. One of the interviewees described that analysing survey data with AI had significantly saved time and they were aiming to use AI to provide valuable data for their customers in the future. Furthermore, the ability to sum up lengthy email threads was described to make communication with clients faster as it was easy to pick up the conversation after not having been engaged in the email thread for a long time. Additionally, using AI to take and summarise meeting notes helped in understanding key points and ensuring easy review of the meetings. Overall, these tasks could have been performed without AI, but the use of AI made the completion of these tasks

significantly more effective and faster. The use of AI in these tasks closely aligns with research by Syam and Sharma (2018, p. 136) who emphasise the functionality of AI in supportive and repetitive tasks to make sales more efficient.

Learning and ability enhancement was identified as another key area for improvement made possible by AI. By using AI-driven tools for learning and ability enhancement, employees were able to access information faster and build on their existing capabilities. This accelerated the learning process and allowed employees to acquire new skills and knowledge more efficiently, increasing their effectiveness in their roles. This finding is also supported by Paschen et al. (2020, p. 410) who emphasise that AI can give salespeople access to the latest and comprehensive information helping them to handle concerns and objections. For example, companies also mentioned that AI has helped them to learn about potential clients faster. They mentioned that they deal with clients who are from many different industries and are likely to face a multitude of challenges in their operations. Therefore, AI was used to prepare for meetings and learn of different contexts that their offering could be used in as found for example in the following statement:

> *"I talk with artificial intelligence about what kind of challenges do clients experience that a specific industry has on a daily basis related to context X or Y related to the services provided by my company. It has sped up my learning." (I6.)*

Efficiencies were found in other functions as well. Most often mentioned were related to language and communication. The interviewees found that AI tools help communicate in languages that they have working proficiencies but are not on a native level. The tools were described to improve written text and help communicate ideas efficiently. Additionally, customers may also communicate complex technical requirements in a language that neither side is native to, and AI was described to help bridge the gap and increase understanding.

The enhancement of existing abilities was also seen in Generative AI which was used for content creation and personalisation, and it often increased the existing capabilities of

the employees. For example, creating sales material and marketing messages was made more efficient by using AI to give ideas and enhance the material produced by employees. One of the companies had done market research with the help of AI. They described that AI was able to effectively point out possible challenges and opportunities in foreign markets. However, conducting reliable research wouldn´t have been possible without extensive knowledge of the professionals on the subject.

> *"Combined with artificial intelligence and my local understanding, I was able to do it [market analysis] for this customer [quickly]. Without AI, I wouldn't have been able to do it. (I3.)"*

4.4 Challenges in using and implementing AI

The case companies face multiple challenges in utilising AI. The challenges are related to technical integration and implementation, quality, culture, resistance to change, resources and the changing market situation. The challenges were also sometimes seen as reasons to not use AI and rely on other methods. Solving these challenges requires an understanding of the sales process and the added value of AI tools. By proactively addressing these challenges, companies can gain competitive advantages and AI developers can improve their products.

The interviews revealed challenges with quality. Many interviewees were disappointed with the realised benefit compared to the promised value. As a result, several interviewees said that they had tried many different tools for the same purpose and still had not necessarily found a solution that suited their needs. However, experimentation was often considered easy and inexpensive for tools that tried to solve a simple task. The quality could also vary, and, for example, generative AI sometimes produced hallucinated content in contrast to good content it also produced. The interviewees also highlighted the incomplete nature of the tools or the development that was still in its early stages, which they felt affected quality.

> *“Those tools are clearly still in the early stages so they don't quite serve in the way that we would like, and you have to look after them a little bit to see what they achieve.” (I5.)*

Overall, many of the technical and quality challenges were seen to be related to the fact that the used AI tools were still in the early development stages. This was acknowledged as a part of the price of being an early adapter of AI. These challenges consisted of things such as inaccuracies, slowing down the performance of systems and losing files. However, even if these challenges were faced, they were not common but decreased the perceived value of the tools.

Furthermore, the interviewees cited a lack of quality in linguistics and understanding of cultural nuances. This was evident from native people's experiences with AI translations to their native language, and it was understood to appear in other languages as well. In addition, some of the tools struggled with the Finnish language and therefore proved untrustworthy. For example, multiple interviewees mentioned that note-taking tools do not properly understand Finnish, especially when the spoken language includes industry-specific terms that are derived from English.

The interviews also highlighted the increased competition for customers' attention driven by AI. The interviewees felt that the easier creation and distribution of content and messages had increased the volume of sales messages, making it more difficult to get one's message heard. As more companies adopt AI to improve the sending of sales and marketing messages, recipients will be flooded with messages, making it harder to stand out. This phenomenon relates to the theory of attention economy presented by Simon (1971, p. 41) according to which lots of information and messages available make attention become a scarce resource. Companies must think about how much they can use AI themselves if everyone else has the same access to these tools, which runs the risk of producing similar content and blending into the crowd. At the same time, however, companies must compete in the number and targeting of messages to maintain their share of voice. The following comment emphasises the challenge:

> *“That threshold [to use AI] is getting lower and lower. This means that more and more salespeople and companies will be able to implement them from automation and communicate a lot to the market, which in general will increase the number of sales messages in all of our emails and LinkedIn and wherever.” (I3.)*

Relating to the increased capability to send out vast amounts of sales messages, some of the case companies had also identified potential risks. They viewed that fully automated contacting poses downsides such as quickly wasting leads with bad approaches and potential damage to the brand caused by too aggressive contacting.

The scarcity of resources is also a clear limitation to the use of AI. Limited budgets and available time postpone or hinder the introduction of more complex AI tools in particular. Such tools were, for example, the built-in AI add-ons of CRM systems. These findings are in line with the limitations presented by Denicolai et al. (2021, p. 10) which highlights the impact of restricted budgets, limited resources, and varying readiness levels within companies. The interviewees indicated that these constraints slow the implementation because time and money must first be invested in advance to gain the benefits later. In addition, there is not always certainty about the benefits that will be obtained, which reduces the expected value as exemplified by these comments:

> *“For example, we have not yet done it [CRM AI integration] for budgetary reasons, in a way, because there was a hefty price tag in relation to what we could analyse and do ourselves.” (I2.)*

> *"If I want to save an hour a week, but in the worst case it may require 20 hours of preparation, then I have to think about whether it's worth it.” (I4.)*

Resistance to change is also found to be a challenge in AI implementation by some companies. The interviewees assert that salespeople need to be convinced that they should invest their time to learn how to use new tools to get them on board. There could be multiple reasons for the reluctance. For example, salespeople can be happy with their current tools and do not see a reason to change. Furthermore, the performance of

salespeople is typically closely monitored and learning new methods could lead to salespeople falling behind their short-term goals. Murphy (2004, p. 1265) highlights that sales goals designed with a short-term emphasis can lead to salespeople feeling torn between compromising long-term goals and meeting immediate sales pressures. This can result in behaviours that do not align with long-term goals. Therefore, companies should organise their sales objectives to support learning. In addition, sales leaders need to constantly encourage the use of new tools and to be able to present concrete benefits as exemplified by the following comments:

> *"A lot of time must be used to remind and inspire. If there were different personalities, maybe it would be different. Other salespeople are more reserved, and they want to hear successes and examples" (I1.)*

> *"The team may implement tools and then maybe not be prepared for the fact that you would have to invest a little time in that implementation." (I4.)*

These findings follow the Technology Acceptance Model (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000, p. 186) that emphasises the importance of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. In this context, perceived ease of use refers to how intuitive the use of a tool is and how much salespeople have to invest time to learn to use the new tool. Perceived usefulness on the other hand refers to the amount of better and faster sales performance the salespeople can obtain by using the AI tool. Thus, by presenting concrete benefits and supporting learning while also understanding the pressures of short-term goals, managers can address the change resistance therefore providing grounds for long-term goals in AI adoption.

One of the companies had also faced resistance from their clients. They had to discontinue the use of a meeting recording and note-taking AI tool because they had to use a considerable amount of time to convince the people in the meetings of the data security and the function of the tool they used. This happened particularly with large enterprise clients that were perceived to approach data security very strictly, while smaller client companies did not voice similar concerns. Paschen et al. (2020, p. 411) discuss similar

challenges and further highlight that customers may feel that salespeople are doing less for them if they use AI. Companies should emphasise to the customers that AI allows them to serve customers better and more efficiently (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 411).

The lack of integration of AI with previously existing systems and its impact on sales practice also hurt the use of AI tools. The simultaneous use of several systems was also considered annoying and inefficient. In practice, this was felt to hinder efficiency, slow down learning the system and negatively affect salespeople's enthusiasm to use the tools.

> *"The more you have to leave your system set up, that's one of the contributing factors that [AI tools] are used less. I can mention an early stage of the process sales tool for this, which is inside the system. So, when you write a message, it [the tool] is next to the message, so it will be used more easily compared to going to a new tab in your browser and having it checked separately somewhere else." (I2.)*

Information security was also mentioned as a challenge, and it had been considered as a limiting factor in the case companies. The interviewees said that they had taken information security risks into account by considering what information they could provide to different tools and editing critical information from the data before uploading. Also integrating new tools into internal systems was viewed to possess a risk of data breaches and customer or internal information leaking. These findings can also be found in the study by Rodriguez et al (2020, p. 7) who highlighted information security in terms of digitalisation and AI as a multi-layered challenge that companies must address.

4.5 AI in international sales

The case companies use varying methods to organise their international sales. The smaller companies operate their international sales fully or almost exclusively remotely from Finland with occasional travelling to client countries. The bigger companies use local sales teams or partners in their target markets and in addition conduct sales operations remotely from Finland.

Market selection is primarily driven by factors such as market size, growth potential, and alignment with the company's objectives. Some companies are using an inbound-based and organic approach to market selection, in which the clients have found them organically online. Through the first references they have been able to expand into the markets where there is existing demand or growth opportunities without heavy reliance on outbound sales efforts. These companies can be seen as accidental internationalists as described by Hennart (2014, p. 2).

The use of AI for market analysis was seen as having potential. One of the companies had successfully used AI to make market analysis for their client. They mentioned that also in this case, AI could not do the work on its own, but it greatly helped the professional to conduct the analysis faster and more comprehensively. This finding aligns with previous research (see Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 13; Paschen et al., 2020, p. 412) promoting the use of AI as a tool to enhance salespeople. However, despite the success in this area, they had not used this method for their own internationalisation and market analysis. Furthermore, other case companies hadn´t used AI in market selection but viewed it as potential for the future. Overall, the market selection appeared to be relatively non-systematic following the findings of Musso and Francioni (2014, p. 308).

The role of AI has been relatively small so far for the case companies in the internationalisation process and the use cases for AI are mostly the same in sales for international markets and the domestic market. The companies have encountered typical internationalisation challenges and had not used AI to solve them. Different AI tools between markets, such as specific prospecting tools, may be used to support sales and marketing efforts in international markets, but they do not appear to drive the overall internationalisation and international sales strategies. An interesting point that most of the companies shared is that AI is easier to use in international settings since the operating language is English and some AI tools do not function as intended in Finnish.

Rutherford and Matthews (2023, p. 12) identify the differences in language as one of the key differences between international and domestic sales. According to the case companies this challenge can be partly solved with AI as language was seen as the biggest difference between markets on the functions that AI can currently assist with. The interviews showed that AI can ease communication with foreign customers in languages that the writer is already familiar with. However, the companies did not use AI to create content fully autonomously in languages that they are not familiar with as exemplified by this comment:

> *"I wouldn't be able to trust the language and the context without the text having been checked by a human." (I2.)*

While AI tools play a supporting role in the internationalisation process, success appears to depend on other factors such as understanding of target markets and the execution of market entry strategies. Furthermore, the case companies did not mention using AI to address the other differences between international and domestic sales highlighted by Rutherford and Matthews (2023, p. 12). Specifically, there was no evidence of AI use in addressing the longer sales cycles, understanding the hierarchical structures within buyers' organisations and cultural norms, or building trust and relationships with international customers. However, the companies had identified other use cases for AI to solve similar issues. For example, knowledge enhancement and faster learning of different industries are similar tasks to understanding buyers´ organisational hierarchy. Therefore, it is likely that practical AI use could be applied to help increase this understanding.

4.6 Future outlook of AI in B2B sales

The interviewees provided predictions and outlooks on how AI will be used by SMEs in B2B sales and internationalisation in the coming years. The responses reflect companies' higher expectations of the future and optimistic scepticism about AI.

Many interviewees felt that the most interesting tools in the future would be those that are fully integrated into existing systems. They believed that integrating different tools and building them into pre-used CRM programs, for example, would make their use significantly easier. It was believed that the increase in ease of use would increase the use of AI more extensively and that it would become part of everyday sales and marketing operations, becoming a technology or tool among others. Some of the respondents also believed that the currently fragmented field of AI tools will become more centralised in the coming years. They had noticed how the functionalities of some individual tools had also been implemented by large software companies. For example, one respondent described the situation as follows:

> *"From the customer's point of view; is it worth rushing and being at the forefront and spending an awful lot of time trying it out and testing it [AI software] and so on? It might not be worth it, because if it's valuable and yields benefits, it will soon come to Teams or Google or something." (I3.)*

Views on the displacement of human work, as the use of AI becomes more efficient, were divided. Most of the interviewees felt that AI would make sales work already done more efficient, but AI was still seen to be far from being able to replace salespeople. This view of using AI to enhance rather than replace is also supported by previous studies (see Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 13; Paschen et al., 2020, p. 412). Efficiencies had already been found at this stage of AI adoption, and it was generally believed that more would be found in the future. On the other hand, in addition to utilising AI, some of the interviewees felt that in the future, salespeople who do not utilise AI will be replaced. For example, according to one respondent, so-called travelling salespeople are no longer efficient today, and certainly not part of the future and this change also applies to adopting other technologies as well. Another interviewee describes the vision of the future in such a way that the salesperson's job is only to talk to customers, nurturing the customer relationship as described in the following:

> *"The ideal situation would be for the salesperson to meet only customers. In the end, they wouldn't really do anything other than create a customer relationship*

> *with meetings, or that's how I see it, that's where the salesperson is needed after all. Everything else can be handled by an assistant. Why can't it be an AI assistant?" (I4.)*

Overall, the interviewees acknowledged that the landscape of AI in sales is evolving rapidly. They expressed that at the moment one has to spend a lot of time learning new things and that there are so many options available, so keeping up with them requires continuous learning. Several respondents compared the current change with previous technological changes and the introduction of new technologies. Many of them saw AI as just another technology like many things before, and the change being very similar to what it always has been when a new revolutionary technology comes to market. One of the interviewees described the situation as a short period of time before everyone uses AI:

> *This is a very short intermediate phase in which we live, and this is nothing new in my opinion. The same thing happened when email marketing became more common. (I3.)*

This view of the fast-changing environment also provoked strategic considerations. According to one of the interviewees companies need to decide if they want to keep adopting new technologies and doing it faster than their competitors. They reasoned that this approach would not bring long-term competitive advantages because the cycle would be endless when using technologies that are not exclusive. Furthermore, the barrier to start using AI was seen to keep lowering and therefore it would be harder to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage by implementing new technologies. However, this also was viewed to lead to a situation where using AI is a must, to not fall behind. On the other hand, the alternative to continuously trying new things was described to be focusing on identifying and automating core processes with AI.

In general, the interviewees shared plenty of opinions and predictions for the future, even though they were not directly asked for in the interview. This may be caused by many reasons. First, the interviewees' forward-looking mindset aimed at continuously

improving the results of the sales organization they lead is likely to make them strategize about the future sales landscape. Secondly, the general hype and optimism surrounding the topic may give the feeling that the utilisation of AI is only just beginning, and it is therefore natural to look to the future. In addition, the numerous challenges that emerged raised hopes for future solutions and improvements to the current situation.

5 Conclusions and directions for future study

This research aimed to study how Finnish SMEs use AI in their domestic and international B2B sales. In conclusion, the findings from the interviews with the case companies shed light on the current state of utilisation of AI from the B2B sales perspective of Finnish international SMEs. The study revealed varying attitudes towards AI, from enthusiasm to sceptical optimism. While the benefits of AI were praised, its incompleteness and challenges were highlighted in every interview. On a general level, however, the attitude was significantly positive. The benefits were obvious and culminated in increased efficiency and time savings. In addition, increasing salespeople's abilities with AI emerged as a significant benefit. For example, the use of a foreign language, knowledge enhancement, and faster learning were highlighted.

On the other hand, companies have faced challenges such as poor quality of AI tools, resistance to change from employees, lack of resources and data security concerns. In addition, the companies were aware that the field is changing rapidly, and technologies are constantly evolving. For this reason, they emphasise an agile and change-ready approach. Looking ahead, companies believe that the benefits of AI will continue to grow, which will also increase its importance in the sales process. This is also expected to put pressure on companies that are not yet using AI. In general, AI is seen as both a challenge and an opportunity that sales organisations will have to deal with in the future. The interviews also revealed that AI is still a long way from displacing the salespeople, but its utilisation was believed to bring significant benefits, leaving salespeople who do not start using AI behind.

Many of the benefits and challenges of AI in sales are similar in domestic and international settings. However, companies had identified potential for AI utilisation in international sales, highlighting knowledge enhancement in market analysis and localisation. Despite the potential of AI, its current role in international sales is supportive rather than being a driver for internationalisation. Some of the reasons for this are the need for supervision of AI output and local knowledge to obtain the benefits.

Overall, the findings are consistent with existing research. Many of the benefits and functions including different use cases throughout the sales process have been reported by other researchers (see Chang, 2022; Denicolai et al., 2021; Paschen et al., 2020; Syam & Sharma, 2018). Furthermore, the challenges faced by the companies are also similar to those found in previous studies (see Chang, 2022, p. 241; Denicolai et al., 2021, p. 10; Paschen et al., 2020, p. 412; Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 135) with limited resources, AI functionality, resistance to change, and lack of knowledge being highlighted. In the context of sales, the findings also align with the previous study by Rodriguez et al. (2020, p. 9) who state that the challenge is finding the right balance between digitalisation and maintaining meaningful interpersonal connections.

5.1 Managerial and theoretical implications

The findings have implications for sales management and AI tool developers. As the threshold for utilising AI is lowered, companies must find ways to stand out from their competitors. One of the interviewees described that companies could either take a strategic approach to utilising AI and identify phases of sales and internationalisation where the use of AI is efficient or try to continuously outpace the competition in new technology implementation.

Implementation often requires time and resources, so it should be seen as a long-term investment. Salespeople's resistance and its underlying causes must be addressed when introducing new technology. For example, salespeople may have fears that the time spent learning new things will not bring results and lead to falling behind goals. Therefore, managers should demonstrate actual benefits and provide training to onboard the employees to use the new AI tools. This finding aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000, p. 186) highlighting the similarity of the implementation of AI and other new technologies before. Another way to increase ease of use and the amount of use is that the tools should also be integrated into existing systems. This can be challenging due to price, technical implementation, and data protection issues,

but the interviewees believed that ease of use is a key factor in starting to use AI. For AI tool developers this means that they should look for strategic partnerships with key software companies to offer integrations.

Focus on quality should also be one of the main considerations in the increasing competition. This is particularly true in the case of generative AI. Currently, the content produced by AI is still often felt to be deficient and in need of human expertise at this stage. This finding suggests that employees who are skilled in their field of expertise should be trained to use AI to get the benefits of the new technology. This was seen for example in doing market research for market selection by one of the companies when they found that AI couldn´t do it on its own but was highly efficient together with a skilled professional. Another example was translating, where AI could not be trusted on its own but was effective with the supervision of a human with skills in the language. This finding is further supported by previous findings (see Hasan & Ojala, 2024, p. 13; Paschen et al., 2020, p. 412) who assert that AI will not replace but enhance professionals.

On the other hand, the lack of quality in many tools accessible to SMEs means that developers of high-quality AI tools face a strategic decision. They should consider whether they want to sell to everyone or offer their clients a competitive advantage through selective sales or premium pricing strategies.

The study also has theoretical implications aligning with existing research on AI implementation in sales. Empirical findings support the theoretical framework proposed by Chang (2022, p. 246), giving it validity in a practical context. Moreover, the findings also suggest that human intelligence and AI could be used simultaneously in certain stages thereby building on the framework by Chang (2022, p. 246).

As for the research implications of the study, the findings provide insight into how AI is being used in different areas of sales, which can help develop new theoretical models of AI practices in sales. The results provide concrete insights into how companies have

integrated AI into their sales processes and what challenges they have faced, which can help guide the design of future studies. For example, researchers can use the identified benefits and challenges as a basis for further research.

5.2 Limitations and directions for future research

This study has only focused on case companies that are Finnish SMEs that could be described as somewhat forerunners in AI adaptation in their reference group. Furthermore, the products and services sold by the companies take place in a digital environment which further limits the scope of the study. These characteristics of the interviewed companies leave room for future research which could focus on different types of companies. For example, it would be beneficial to research the situation in companies that are not at the forefront of AI adoption to find out the reasons for their lack of motivation for new technologies. Another perspective would be to study companies that sell physical products instead of digital products and services. This approach could highlight possible differences in AI use cases and implementation between different types of sales processes. Furthermore, studying large companies would bring a different perspective on how bigger resources and also on the other hand less agile organisations use AI.

Also, the methods of the study set limitations and provide grounds for future research. This study focuses on data from a single time point. This method limits the study to only analyse the current situation in the companies and the past experiences in relation to the present state. This is an important limitation especially since the field of AI is rapidly evolving and easy-to-implement AI tools have only been available for a relatively short time period. Therefore, future studies could employ a longitudinal design to examine changes in AI implementation and assess the long-term effects. Furthermore, this study offers insight into experiences and perceptions of AI implementation and therefore future research could focus on objective metrics. These could include outcomes of AI adoption, such as productivity, customer satisfaction, and influence on revenue growth.

Another avenue for future research could be to examine the practical potential of AI to address the differences between international and domestic sales in terms of relationship building and longer sales cycles as highlighted by Rutherford and Matthews (2023, p. 12). This could provide insight into the challenges of international sales for which this study did not find practical AI use cases and thus offer ways to create a competitive advantage abroad.

An important limitation of the study is that a case study has limited coverage of the field overall since the number of interviews is low. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to a larger population. Nevertheless, the outcomes can be somewhat applied to businesses with comparable characteristics for example in their sales processes. Furthermore, an interview as a data collection method can lead to the interviewees telling a fitting story to make themselves look better or worse than the situation is. This can happen if the interviewee wishes to modify the truth to appear more knowledgeable or to hide company strategies in fear of competition (Hirsijärvi & Hurme, 2022, Chapter 3.1). In the case of this study, the companies might have exaggerated their level of AI adoption or on the contrary told a limited version of their expertise. In addition, the interviewees might understand the questions differently and therefore provide answers from varying perspectives.

References

6sense. (2023, August 18). *Plugging Sales Pipeline Leaks, Part 1: Lead Generation | 6sense*. Https://6sense.Com/. https://6sense.com/blog/sales-pipeline-leaks-lead-generation/

Ahi, A., Baronchelli, G., Kuivalainen, O., & Piantoni, M. (2017). International Market Entry: How Do Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Make Decisions? *Journal of International Marketing*, *25*(1). https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.15.0130

Ångström, R. C., Björn, M., Dahlander, L., Mähring, M., & Wallin, M. W. (2023). Getting AI Implementation Right: Insights from a Global Survey. *California Management Review*, *66*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/00081256231190430

Arshi, T. A., Rao, V., Begum, V., & Çapar, N. (2022). Early internationalisation of entrepreneurial firms: The role of artificial intelligence enhanced business models. *J. for International Business and Entrepreneurship Development*, *14*(4), 536. https://doi.org/10.1504/JIBED.2022.130387

Bini, S. A. (2018). Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Deep Learning, and Cognitive Computing: What Do These Terms Mean and How Will They Impact Health Care? *The Journal of Arthroplasty*, *33*(8), 2358–2361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arth.2018.02.067

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

BUREAU, O. (2023). *TasticAI - 4000 artificial intelligence tools categorized* [dataset]. [object Object]. https://doi.org/10.25625/M7RULY

Care, J., & Bohlig, A. (2008). *Mastering Technical Sales: The Sales Engineer's Handbook*. Artech House. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tritonia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=456890

Chalmers, D., MacKenzie, N. G., & Carter, S. (2021). Artificial Intelligence and Entrepreneurship: Implications for Venture Creation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *45*(5), 1028–1053. https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258720934581

Chang, W. (2022). The effectiveness of AI salesperson vs. Human salesperson across the buyer-seller relationship stages. *Journal of Business Research*, *148*, 241–251. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.04.065

Cience. (2023). *Join the GO SDR Voice AI Waitlist | The Future of Conversational AI*. https://www.cience.com/cience-go-voice-ai

Denicolai, S., Zucchella, A., & Magnani, G. (2021). Internationalization, digitalization, and sustainability: Are SMEs ready? A survey on synergies and substituting effects

among growth paths. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *166*, 120650. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120650

Dwyer, F. R., Schurr, P. H., & Oh, S. (1987). Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, *51*(2), 11–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298705100202

Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory Building From Cases: Opportunities And Challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(1), 25–32. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.24160888

Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2016). *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (2nd edition). Sage Publications. https://elevate.talis.com/uwasa/player/modules/63bc044df62dbb7585d7e107/epubs/645c04ba1cf02120386e0721?chapter=32

European Commission. (2020). *User guide to the SME definition.* Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2873/255862

Fischer, H., Seidenstricker, S., Berger, T., & Holopainen, T. (2022). *Artificial intelligence in B2B sales: Impact on the sales process*. 13th International Conference on Applied Human Factors and Ergonomics (AHFE 2022). https://doi.org/10.54941/ahfe1001456

Fish, K., & Ruby, P. (2009). AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOREIGN MARKET SCREENING METHOD FOR SMALL BUSINESSES. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship*, *13*, 65–81.

Fraccastoro, S., Gabrielsson, M., & Pullins, E. B. (2021). The integrated use of social media, digital, and traditional communication tools in the B2B sales process of international SMEs. *International Business Review*, *30*(4), 101776. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2020.101776

Gartner. (2023, May 16). *Gartner Identifies Top Sales Technologies to Boost Buyer Engagement*. Gartner. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-05-16-gartner-identifies-top-sales-technologies-to-boost-buyer-engagement

Haenlein, M., & Kaplan, A. (2019). A Brief History of Artificial Intelligence: On the Past, Present, and Future of Artificial Intelligence. *California Management Review*, *61*(4), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125619864925

Hasan, R., & Ojala, A. (2024). Managing artificial intelligence in international business: Toward a research agenda on sustainable production and consumption. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *66*(2), 151–170. https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.22369

Hennart, J. (2014). The Accidental Internationalists: A Theory of Born Globals. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *38*(1), 117–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12076

Hervé, A., Schmitt, C., & Baldegger, R. (2020). Digitalization, Entrepreneurial Orientation & Internationalization of Micro-, Small-, and Medium-Sized Enterprises. *Technology Innovation Management Review*, *10*(4), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.22215/timreview/1343

Hildebrand, C., & Bergner, A. (2019). AI-Driven Sales Automation: Using Chatbots to Boost Sales. *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review*, *11*(2), 36–41. https://doi.org/10.2478/nimmir-2019-0014

Hirsijärvi, S., & Hurme, H. (2022). *Tutkimushaastattelu | Ellibs Lukuohjelma*. Gaudeamus. https://www.ellibslibrary.com/reader/9789523458123

Johanson, J., & Vahlne, J.-E. (2009). The Uppsala internationalization process model revisited: From liability of foreignness to liability of outsidership. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *40*(9), 1411–1431. https://doi.org/10.1057/jibs.2009.24

Kadić-Maglajlić, S., Chaker, N. N., & Arslanagić-Kalajdzić, M. (2021). The same only different: Seven steps of selling in emerging markets. In F. Jaramillo & J. P. Mulki (Eds.),

A Research Agenda for Sales. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788975315.00013

Kaushal, V., & Yadav, R. (2023). Learning successful implementation of Chatbots in businesses from B2B customer experience perspective. *Concurrency and Computation: Practice and Experience*, *35*(1), e7450. https://doi.org/10.1002/cpe.7450

Kinkel, S., Capestro, M., Di Maria, E., & Bettiol, M. (2023). Artificial intelligence and relocation of production activities: An empirical cross-national study. *International Journal of Production Economics*, *261*, 108890. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2023.108890

Kohli, A. K., & Jaworski, B. J. (1990). Market Orientation: The Construct, Research Propositions, and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Marketing*, *54*(2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299005400201

Kriukow, J. (Director). (2020, July 31). *Qualitative coding and thematic analysis in Microsoft Word*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOYhkUC21wQ

Lindsay, V., Rod, M., & Ashill, N. (2017). Institutional and resource configurations associated with different SME foreign market entry modes. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *66*, 130–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.07.014

Marr, B. (2016, April 5). *Why Everyone Must Get Ready For The 4th Industrial Revolution*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2016/04/05/why-everyone-must-get-ready-for-4th-industrial-revolution/?sh=56f8080b3f90

McKinsey & Company. (2022, December). *Degree of difficulty in hiring for artificial intelligence (AI) related tech roles worldwide in 2022, by function.* Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1369069/challenges-in-ai-related-hiring-worldwide/

McKinsey & Company. (2023, August). *The state of AI in 2023: Generative AI's breakout year | McKinsey*. https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-in-2023-generative-ais-breakout-year

Moncrief, W. C., & Marshall, G. W. (2005). The evolution of the seven steps of selling. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *34*(1), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2004.06.001

Murphy, W. H. (2004). In pursuit of short-term goals: Anticipating the unintended consequences of using special incentives to motivate the sales force. *Journal of Business Research*, *57*(11), 1265–1275. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(02)00447-2

Musso, F., & Francioni, B. (2014). International strategy for SMEs: Criteria for foreign markets and entry modes selection. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *21*(2), 301–312. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-10-2013-0149

Neubert, M. (2018). The Impact of Digitalization on the Speed of Internationalization of Lean Global Startups. *Technology Innovation Management Review*, *8*(5), 44–54. https://doi.org/10.22215/timreview/1158

Paschen, J., Wilson, M., & Ferreira, J. J. (2020). Collaborative intelligence: How human and artificial intelligence create value along the B2B sales funnel. *Business Horizons*, *63*(3), 403–414. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.01.003

Rapp, A., & Beeler, L. (2021). The state of selling & sales management research: A review and future research agenda. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *29*(1), 37–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2020.1860680

Rehm, G., Marheinecke, K., Hegele, S., Piperidis, S., Bontcheva, K., Hajič, J., Choukri, K., Vasiļjevs, A., Backfried, G., Prinz, C., Pérez, J. M. G., Meertens, L., Lukowicz, P., van Genabith, J., Lösch, A., Slusallek, P., Irgens, M., Gatellier, P., Köhler, J., … Yvon, F. (2020). *The European Language Technology Landscape in 2020: Language-Centric and Human-Centric AI for Cross-Cultural Communication in Multilingual Europe*. https://doi.org/10.48550/ARXIV.2003.13833

Rodríguez, R., Svensson, G., & Mehl, E. J. (2020). Digitalization process of complex B2B sales processes – Enablers and obstacles. *Technology in Society*, *62*, 101324. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101324

Root, F. R. (1998). *Entry Strategies for International Markets*. John Wiley & Sons.

Rutherford, B. N., & Matthews, R. L. (2023). Stages of the international industrial sales process. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*. https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-01-2023-0031

Salesforce. (2022). *State of Sales 5th Edition*.

Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2023). *Research Methods for Business Students* (9th ed.). Pearson International Content. https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/reader/books/9781292402741/epub-cfi/6/184[%3Bvnd.vst.idref%3DChapter05-08]!/4/2/20/1:52[de%20%2Cbet]

Simon, H. (1971). Designing Organizations for an Information-rich World. *The Johns Hopkins Press*. https://web.archive.org/web/20201006235931/https://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=33748

Singh, J., Flaherty, K., Sohi, R. S., Deeter-Schmelz, D., Habel, J., Le Meunier-FitzHugh, K., Malshe, A., Mullins, R., & Onyemah, V. (2019). Sales profession and professionals in the age of digitization and artificial intelligence technologies: Concepts,

priorities, and questions. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *39*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2018.1557525

Strange, R., & Zucchella, A. (2017). Industry 4.0, global value chains and international business. *Multinational Business Review*, *25*(3), 174–184. https://doi.org/10.1108/MBR-05-2017-0028

Syam, N., & Sharma, A. (2018). Waiting for a sales renaissance in the fourth industrial revolution: Machine learning and artificial intelligence in sales research and practice. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *69*, 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.12.019

Tuomi, J., & Sarajärvi, A. (2018). *Laadullinen tutkimus ja sisällönanalyysi*. Tammi.

Venkatesh, V., & Davis, F. D. (2000). A Theoretical Extension of the Technology Acceptance Model: Four Longitudinal Field Studies. *Management Science*, *46*(2), 186–204. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.46.2.186.11926

Welch, L., & Luostarinen, R. (1988). Internationalization: Evolution of a Concept. *Journal of General Management*, *14*, 155–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/030630708801400203

Wengler, S., Hildmann, G., & Vossebein, U. (2021). Digital transformation in sales as an evolving process. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *36*(4), 599–614. https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-03-2020-0124

Zhang, H., & Song, M. (2022). How Big Data Analytics, AI, and Social Media Marketing Research Boost Market Orientation. *Research-Technology Management*, *65*(2), 64–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2022.2022907

Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide

Introduction (1-2 min)	Introduce the study, myself, and my organisation. Inform the interviewee of the confidentiality and anonymity of the answers. Inform the interviewee of the right not to answer a question if they do not wish to. Inform the interviewee of the right to stop the interview at any time. Get consent to participate and to record the interview.
Broad questions (3-5 min)	How do you feel about AI overall? Tell about your experiences with AI in sales.
In-depth questions (15-20 min)	What are the things in AI you find useful and not useful? In which stages of the sales do you use AI? Have you identified a stage where AI did not work/was not useful? Why are you not using AI in the x stage? (if not used at some stage). Which individual AI tools your organisation uses? What is your internationalisation strategy? How have you selected your international markets? Have you noticed any differences between markets? (are some tools more useful in other markets etc.) How does this compare to your previous experiences? Are new sales methods more time-consuming, or have you saved time? Follow-up question: why is that the case? How do you assess the impact of AI on your sales so far? Have you had better results? In what areas? Have you had technical problems with AI and if so, have they influenced your operations? Do you wish you could go back to traditional methods? What things are limiting the use of AI?
Clarifications and link to theory (5 min)	According to studies, employees may have fears about artificial intelligence (substitution of work, difficulty in

	learning, loss of autonomy) (this can be seen in some sectors, at least in studies). How have you taken into account possible resistance to change and employee fears? Has there been any resistance to change?
Closing (1 min)	Concluding statement and thanking the respondent.