

# The Role of Future Skills in Sales Engineering

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## **The Role of Future Skills in Sales Engineering**

Focusing on future skills has become paramount in academic and industry discussions as technological innovation reshapes sectors and professions globally. These transformations significantly influence technical sales, a specialized area within sales engineering, primarily through advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and evolving customer expectations. The “Future Skills in Sales Engineering” convention at the University of Applied Sciences (UAS) Düsseldorf in 2024 highlighted these developments by bringing together leading academics and industry professionals to explore the skills essential for future sales engineers. The basis for this discussion was the findings of an expert circle led by Thomas Berger, which examined the skills landscape and emerging global trends affecting sales engineering.

## **The Evolving Landscape of Sales Engineering**

Driven by both global and technological factors, skills in technical sales are not only advancing but also facing pressures for restructuring or even potential outsourcing to AI-driven systems. Through analysis of multiple global studies on buyer-seller dynamics and the specific challenges faced across various countries, the expert circle and the panel discussed vital elements shaping the evolution of technical sales and the consequential impact on technical sales professionals.

### *Forces Shaping the Future of Sales*

As early as Anderson’s 1996 study<sup>2</sup>, three central forces were identified as having an impact on the future of sales: behavioral, technological, and managerial forces. Behavioral forces include rising customer expectations and the pressures of globalization, which require sales engineers to address complex and diverse customer needs. Technological forces, encompassing automation and digital transformation,

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<sup>1</sup> Chat GPT helped to find the right words to express, what we wanted to share.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, E. (1996). *Customer relationships: Buyer-seller relationships and the future of marketing*. Journal of Marketing, 60(4), 5-16.

are reshaping sales processes by introducing tools that streamline workflows. Managerial forces, such as outsourcing trends and a shift toward direct marketing, are also redefining the role of the sales engineer. These forces collectively highlight trends that influence sales strategies and the skill sets needed for future success in technical sales.

Similarly, the 2013 report “The Changing Landscape of B2B Buying and the Future of Sales”<sup>3</sup> identifies that B2B buyers are becoming increasingly sophisticated, driven by global market trends and new technologies. Integrating digital tools, automation, and AI has intensified competition, requiring companies to adopt strategies that respond swiftly to market demands. Furthermore, the rise of emerging markets creates growth opportunities and demands that companies adapt their approaches to diverse economic and cultural contexts.

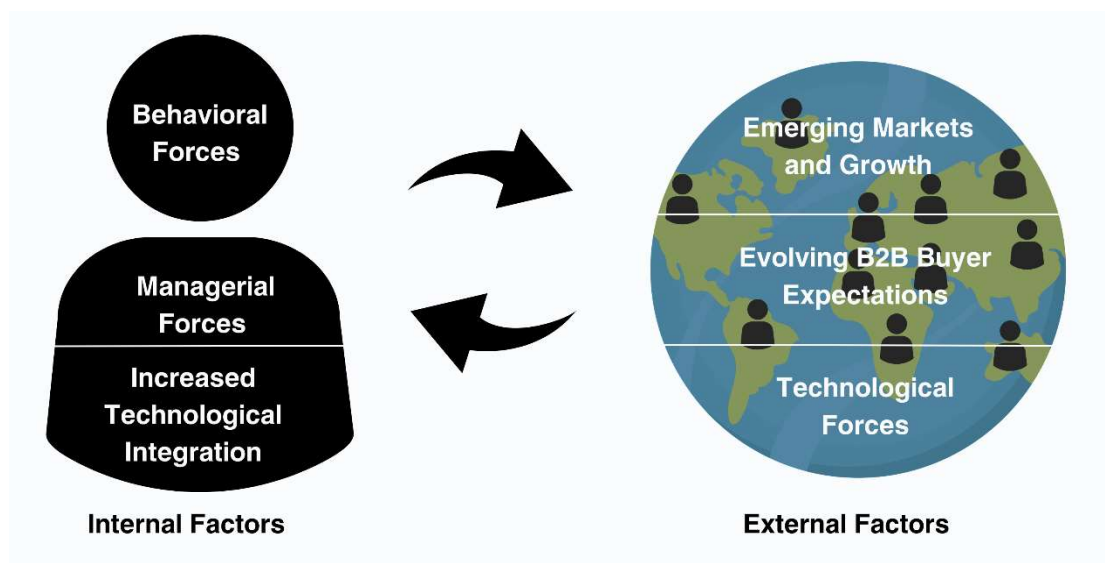


Figure 1: Forces and Trends Shaping the Future of B2B Sales

### Challenges in Sales Engineering

Sales engineers face numerous challenges, particularly in building client relationships, adapting to technological advances, and acquiring competencies to thrive in a dynamic environment. A recent study<sup>4</sup> with over 1,200 participants from 21 countries found that

<sup>3</sup> Institute for the Study of Business Markets. (2013). *The changing landscape of B2B buying and the future of sales*. Institute for the Study of Business Markets Report.

<sup>4</sup> Fischer, M., Seidenstricker, S., & Poepplbuss, J. (2023). *How challenges affect sales engineers: The role of information, communication, and interaction*. Academic Association of Sales Engineering.

B2B buying has grown more complex as buyers demand excellent technical expertise and customized solutions. Sales engineers are increasingly expected to guide clients through digitalized customer journeys, employing AI and digital tools. This trend underlines the critical role of technology in sales engineering while highlighting the continued need for human skills to manage client relationships effectively.<sup>5</sup>

### *Role of AI and Digitalization in Sales*

AI has become a prominent tool in sales, especially for text generation, translations, and data management throughout the customer journey. In a survey of German sales engineers, nearly half reported using AI for tasks related to text processing. However, AI is generally perceived as a supplement to human interaction rather than a replacement, especially for high-complexity technical products that require personalized service. The consensus among industry experts suggests that while digital tools can enhance efficiency, they cannot replace the human touch essential in complex sales environments.<sup>6,7</sup>

### *Essential Skills and Competencies for Sales Engineers*

Several key competencies were identified as being essential for future sales engineers. While digital skills are increasingly critical, the ability to discern when to employ digital tools versus when to engage in personal interactions remains crucial. Essential skills highlighted include:

- *Empathy*: A deep understanding of customer needs remains essential even with technological advances.
- *Technical Acumen*: Robust knowledge of products and sales facilitation tools.
- *Adaptability*: Flexibility to adjust strategies in response to new technologies and changing customer behaviors.

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<sup>5</sup> Fischer, M., Seidenstricker, S., Berger, T. B., & Holopainen, J. (2021). *Technologies: AI in sales – What is currently available across the customer journey?* Academic Association of Sales Engineering.

<sup>6</sup>Fischer, M., Seidenstricker, S., Berger, T. B., & Holopainen, J. (2021). *Study of competencies in sales engineering across Germany, China, India, and the USA.* Academic Association of Sales Engineering.

<sup>7</sup> Järvinen, J., & Taiminen, H. M. (2016). *Harnessing marketing automation for B2B content marketing.* Industrial Marketing Management, 54, 164-175.

- *Complexity Management*: Competency in addressing multifaceted problems, especially those involving digital tools and AI.
- *Human-Centric Skills*: Maintaining authentic communication and building trust, even within digital sales interactions.

The discussion emphasized that future success in sales engineering will depend on a balanced skill set integrating digital literacy with interpersonal capabilities, enabling engineers to navigate a tech-driven landscape while maintaining strong client relationships.<sup>8</sup>

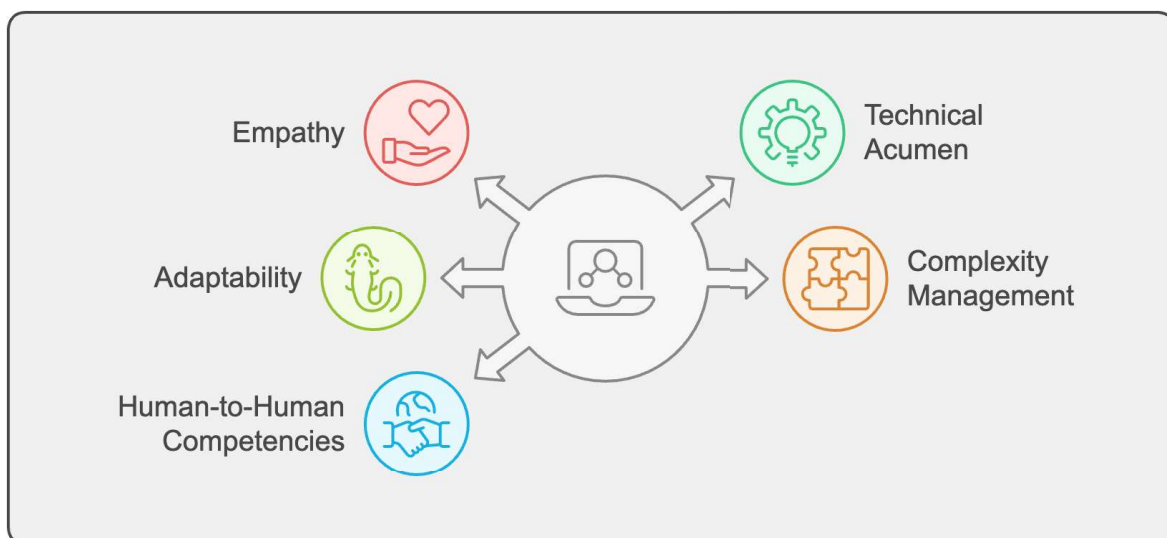


Figure 2: Key Future Skills of Sales Engineers

### The Future of AI in Technical Sales: Projections for the Next Three Years

AI's role in technical sales is expected to grow, aiding efficiency but requiring sales engineers to become proficient in managing these tools. Discussion points from the convention included:

- *Automation*: AI will handle data-gathering and other time-intensive tasks, freeing sales engineers for more client-focused responsibilities.

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<sup>8</sup> Korpela, H. (2015). *Competencies for successful salespeople: Knowledge, skills, and abilities for modern sales roles*.

- *AI Tool Management:* Sales engineers will manage AI applications, ensuring their use aligns with business goals while preserving human elements in client interactions.
- *Authenticity in AI-Driven Sales:* Although AI can streamline operations, building trust through genuine interaction remains crucial for relationship-building.
- *Data Quality Management:* Ensuring high-quality data input will be vital as AI's efficacy depends on reliable data sources.

Sales engineers will need to understand and strategically utilize AI in ways that complement rather than supplant their roles.

### *Trust in Virtual Sales Environments*

Trust is foundational in sales, whether in physical or virtual interactions. The panel addressed the dynamics of trust-building in digital settings:

- *Leveraging Flexibility in Virtual Sales:* Virtual interactions offer increased resource availability, enhancing support for sales engagements.
- *Time Investment:* Dedicating time to clients in virtual or face-to-face settings helps establish trust.
- *Building Long-Term Relationships:* Virtual sales have become valuable for relationship-building, though personal meetings remain important.

The panel concluded that, while technology can support, it cannot replace the trust established through human interaction.

### *Cultural Considerations in Sales Engineering*

Culture significantly impacts sales strategies and requires sales engineers to align with the expectations of diverse markets and clients. The integration of digital tools and AI in sales engineering also demands cultural sensitivity:

- *Cultural Awareness:* Recognizing and respecting cultural differences is essential in global markets.
- *Communication:* Effective communication skills are paramount in resolving client issues and managing expectations.

- *Trust and Adaptability:* Adapting approaches to various cultural contexts fosters trust.

Though AI can assist in understanding cultural trends, genuine cultural sensitivity requires hands-on, personal engagement.

### *Key Challenges and Forces in Sales Engineering*

Sales engineering faces ongoing challenges shaped by behavioral, technological, and managerial forces. These forces underscore both global trends and region-specific issues, particularly in integrating AI and digital tools into the sales process. The future skills necessary for sales engineers will increasingly blend technical proficiency with core interpersonal abilities, equipping them to manage client interactions in an AI-enhanced environment.

### **Conclusion**

The future of sales engineering exists at the intersection of human skill and technological enhancement. As AI and digital tools streamline routine tasks, sales engineers' roles will increasingly focus on personalized, empathetic, and expertise-driven engagement. Cultivating the right balance of technical and human skills will be crucial for future success in this evolving field.

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