

Preparing for the Next Normal: How University Sales Competitions and the Development of Students' Sales-Relevant Skills Have Changed Through COVID-19

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Purpose of the Study: Businesses globally are in need of highly skilled sales personnel, yet they face an ongoing shortage of suitable candidates. Universities offering top sales programs support the closing of this demand/supply gap by preparing students with the help of sales competitions. During the COVID-19 crisis those contests also had to be transferred into the virtual world. This study investigates which sales-relevant skills students can develop through preparing and participating in a university sales competition and if those skills vary between online and face-to-face competition settings.

Method/Design and Sample: The study classifies as an exploratory research design and includes 23 in-depth interviews conducted with competition participants, sales educators and company representatives from eleven nations during the European Sales Competition. The intention was to get a first-person description of how students perceive the experience and to obtain insights from a third-person view by interviewing educators and judges, enriching the data by including various perspectives.

Results: The study identified six sales-relevant skill areas (communication skills, intercultural skills, personal and social skills, professional demeanor, sales acumen as well as utilization of tools in sales) and revealed differences between the competition formats. Although the online setting prepares students for the new work environment to come, not all sales-relevant skills can be trained in an online setting yet.

Value to Marketing Educators: The results gathered have relevant implications for educators in the sales discipline and other teachers focusing on communication or interpersonal skills, who incorporate virtual formats in their pedagogical toolbox. Furthermore, the study provides suggestions on organizing and preparing students for a virtual sales competition.

Keywords: sales competition, online competition, sales education, development of sales skills, COVID-19

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Introduction

Highly skilled sales force is vital to business success (Fogel et al., 2012). Today's relevance of finding skilled employees is highlighted in a study conducted by LinkedIn (2017), ranking sales as the number one priority role to fill in enterprises worldwide. This is supported by the Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020, confirming a strong demand for sales personnel globally for both, experienced and entry-level workforce (International Labour Organization, 2020). Sales professionals nowadays are expected to have a wider set of general skills, such as teamwork ability, in addition to specialized skills for the specific occupation in the area of sales. Furthermore, sales people need to be equipped with digital skills like computer literacy

(International Labour Organization, 2020). Today's sales environment is characterized by disruptive business practices, dramatic advances in technology as well as the globalization of customer base (Sisakhti, 2015). Consequently, the task of sales people has become more demanding due to growing competition in many industries, as well as an increasing number of online purchases (Bongers et al., 2021).

At the same time, employers globally face an ongoing shortage of suitable salespeople (Cummins et al., 2013), possibly caused and supported by the present negative perception of sales jobs among students (e.g. Waldeck et al., 2010). Nevertheless, Baalbaki et al. (2014) and Handley et al. (2017) show that this trend may be reversed through sales education

at university level and in addition increase students' intent to pursue careers in sales (Peltier et al., 2014).

To close the demand/supply gap of highly skilled sales force, the number of universities offering top sales programs has increased steadily (Sales education foundation, 2019), the majority of which choosing to prepare students with the help of experiential learning methods led by role-plays (Cummins et al., 2013). In addition, some programs utilize sales competitions to train students (Mani et al., 2015). This format originated in the USA and today is found in various formats and sizes (Holopainen et al., 2019), such as the longest ongoing university sales competition, the National Collegiate Sales Competition, founded in 1999 (NCSC, 2020).

In 2020 the world was shaken by the outbreak of COVID-19, a pandemic that "[...] affects all segments of the population" (United Nations, 2020). Part of that population are 1.57 billion students around the globe whose lives have been significantly impacted by sudden lockdowns (IESALC, 2020). The status quo was challenged in multiple ways and solutions were found by many. Educational institutions moved to virtual classes and also found a way to combine synchronous and asynchronous pedagogies (Seetharaman, 2020). The European Sales Competition, too, worked on a solution after the cancellation of its annual event in its original format. The answer was a competition carried out online in December 2020 with 55 students from 12 different countries (European Sales Competition, 2020).

Despite the fact that there has been a growing demand for graduates in the field of sales and an increase of sales programs offered at university level, academic literature and research in this area have been relatively slow in responding to the needs of students and employers (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). This is especially true when it comes to university sales competition role plays (Mani et al., 2015). Moreover, the integration of a virtual component in sales competitions has received little attention so far (Cummins et al., 2020). Therefore, the authors see the current change and disruption as an opportunity to learn and grow, which will be utilized to search for the difference between the two settings, virtual and face-to-face, and its implications on students' development of sales relevant skills.

Therefore, our aim is to identify:

- 1) Which sales-related skills can be developed by preparation for and participation in a university sales competition?
- 2) How does the development of sales-related skills vary between the settings of a virtual versus a traditional sales competition?

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

Although the amount of academic publications in the area of sales education is growing, the pace is still slow (Cummins et al. 2013). The vast majority of articles cover experiential learning, especially in-class role-plays (Cummins et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2020).

Role plays are an important teaching tool for the further development of sales competencies (Widmier et al., 2007). Possible reasons for the common use of role-playing might be the better internalization of concepts (Neeley & Cherry, 2010), the opportunity to gather business experiences during the study (Sojka & Fish, 2008) or the general superiority compared to traditional learning strategies (Inks & Avila, 2008).

In comparison, the sales competition format combines sales role-plays with a competition aspect. In other words, it uses the benefits of role-play and adds a level of pressure to it, which was found to motivate participants to maximize performance and encourage learning, while still being perceived a positive experience altogether (Widmier et al., 2007).

When it comes to research on sales competitions, three different streams of literature exist. Firstly, academic sources focusing on *using competitions in sales classes to train specific sales-related skills* (Cummins et al., 2015; Pelletier & Hopkins, 2018; Widmier et al., 2007) gathered in category A. Secondly, category B describing stand-alone competitions, i.e. *sales competition settings outside the known sales course or curriculum* (Loe & Chonko, 2000; Mani et al., 2015). And lastly, a *comparison between online and traditional formats in sales education* (Alvarez et al., 2015; Inks et al., 2020; Rippé et al., 2016) is drawn in category C.

Within category a), Widmier et al. (2007) showed that the competition aspect added to in-class role-play works as an effective tool for teaching sales skills, which helps closing the gap between knowledge and skills in the classroom versus in the field. Cummins et al. (2015) investigated classroom interventions in sales courses, including sales competitions in a mini format, and showed that they positively affect students' perception of and interest in pursuing careers in sales. A different approach, namely sales role-play among students from two different universities utilizing videoconferencing technology, was studied by Pelletier and Hopkins (2018). The experiment resulted in improved communication skills and increased confidence among students.

Research on category b) includes Loe and Chonko (2000), whom solely focused on the description and introduction of the first National Collegiate Sales Competition. On the other hand, Mani et al. (2015) investigated student performance in sales competitions, which was found to be affected by motivation and ability. Moreover, evidence was provided that success in the competition leads to an increased success rate in job interviews.

Lastly, category c) has been addressed by a handful of scholars. Alvarez et al. (2015) results indicate that students' critical thinking skills are positively influenced by experiential learning activities whilst no significant differences were found between face-to-face and online education. A study carried out by Rippé et al. (2016) described an innovative online sales course using experiential learning methods. The results showed that the online class was assessed equally to its face-to-face equivalent. Furthermore, students reported that they

highly appreciated its interactivity, gained knowledge on the sales process, and found applications for their current employment. Additionally, Inks et al. (2020) provided insights on transferring a traditional university sales competition into a virtual format and also contributed feedback from participants on this transition, such as a reported decrease in interpersonal interactions online.

While the traditional setting of university sales competitions may continue to be a valuable tool for sales educators, the authors propose that investigating its online equivalent is of utmost importance to be able to respond to the need of online solutions caused by the pandemic COVID-19.

Yet, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study exists on how traditional university sales competitions differ from their online equivalents in terms of students' development of sales-relevant skills. Therefore, this paper aims at filling this void.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this paper is to provide insights into the different formats of sales competitions and their impact on the development of sales-related skills. A qualitative research approach was the natural choice given the complex nature of the field. Moreover, qualitative research is appropriate when a real-life context is important (Sinkovics et al., 2005) and when the focus lies on the lived experience of individuals (Thompson, 1997). Consequently, in-depth interviews with participants of sales competitions were conducted.

The exploratory approach of the study aims at developing a grounded understanding of the skills generated while training and participating in a sales competition, and the potential differences between an online and offline format. The competition utilized is the biggest transnational student contest in personal selling in Europe (European Sales Competition, 2021), namely the *European Sales Competition* (ESC). Our study compares its traditional offline format, last held in 2019, with its new virtual equivalent. The aim of both competitions was to simulate a selling process of a complex IT solution in an international context. The central objectives of the competitions did not diverge between the offline format in 2019 and the online one in 2020. The process simulated in the event includes multiple conversations each aiming at a different goal. In brief the stages are: 1) an elevator pitch aiming at securing a follow-up meeting, 2) a conversation with a representative focusing on identifying potential problems, its impact on the customer as well as uncovering the decision-making process and the key decision makers, 3) presentation of the offering, targeting at convincing the customer of the benefits and the value of the IT solution for the organization, and lastly 4) negotiating a contract with a key decision maker of the customer (M. Dielissen, personal communication, February 28, 2019; European Sales Competition, 2020; European Sales Competition 2020, personal communication, November 2020).

Qualitative research focused on in-depth exploration with a small but diverse sample size. We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with respondents from eleven nations during the European Sales Competition in December 2020. The interview partners came from four different groups, including (i) six students who competed in a traditional sales competition, (ii) eight students who competed in a virtual sales competition, (iii) six university professors who trained students for both, off- and online competitions and (iv) three company representatives who participated as judges. The intention on the one hand was to get a first-person description of how students perceive the experience (Thompson et al., 1989) of a sales competition, and on the other hand to obtain insights from a third-person view, by interviewing educators and judges in order to enrich the data by including various perspectives (Morse & Richards, 2007).

The interview partners were selected from the list of participants for ESC 2019 and ESC 2020 including students, teachers and company partners. Prior to the interview the participants were contacted via email or LinkedIn to explain the nature of the study and arrange the interview.

A conceptual framework was prepared including a set of research questions, ideas on the interview partners, the sampling method as well as an interview guideline. The interview guideline was based on the two main research questions, including specific questions generated from literature on sales competences and sales competitions (e.g. Koponen et al., 2019). Since we used a multi-actor study it was necessary to adjust the interview guideline to the specific sub-groups of participants, teachers and company partners. Whereas the main themes were covered by all interview partners, in the study design we made sure to include the interrelated aspects of the same phenomenon, experienced by the three different actors (Arsel, 2017). The guideline for participants included questions such as "how would you describe your experience as participant in the ESC?", "how did you prepare for the competition?", "what skills did you develop?". Educators were asked about "how did you prepare your students for the online/offline competition", "what skill-set can/cannot be developed in the preparation and participation". On the other hand the guideline for company partners was adjusted by asking "what skills do students need in an entry-level sales position", "with your experience as a judge, what skills do students generate by participating in the competition?" as well as "what is the influence of the current pandemic situation on the skill-set needed?". The interview guideline was pre-tested and refined after an early analysis of the first transcripts.

The interviews took place during a period of 4 weeks starting mid November 2020. One researcher conducted all the interviews, which is in line with the general suggestion to involve a single researcher in the data collection in order to allow for a deeper exploration of the phenomenon and to control for possible interfering biases (Morse & Richards, 2007). All interviews were conducted on MS Teams. The

interviews were held in English and lasted between 20 and 57 minutes. With the participants' permission, each interview was videotaped and transcribed, resulting in 342 pages of text. A sample description can be found in table I.

The analysis of qualitative data followed the basic steps of coding data, combining codes into categories/themes, and interpreting the results (Creswell, 2007; Sinkovics et al., 2005). It was conducted, after all data had been collected with the data analysis software MAXQDA. As recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the data analysis was an iterative process of reading, coding, and discussing the coding with colleagues.

Working in a team of researchers can be very helpful "to increase comprehensibility, to support intersubjectivity, and to provide sound interpretation of the data gathered" (Burla et al., 2008, p. 113). To establish reliability in qualitative research and to ensure consistency while coding, we used the *negotiated agreement* approach (Campbell et al., 2013), starting with the three researchers independently of each other fully coding two transcripts. In the next step, we compared our coding for these transcripts, and discussed the interpretation and disagreements with the intention to establish a common understanding of the codes. In this process, each code and its assigned definitions were discussed intensively in order to establish a higher level of intercoder agreement. After feeling confident with the coding scheme all three researchers coded the remaining transcripts. During the coding process, the transcripts were re-read repeatedly in order to search for common patterns, themes and relationships. The codes were developed both, inductive and deductive by on the one hand reviewing the transcripts line by line several times to get a feel of the whole (Charmaz, 2014). On the other hand, the coding was also guided by the literature on this topic, such as the sales competences concept in B2B selling (Koponen et al., 2019). Throughout the entire process a codebook was used including the codename, a description and examples. The codebook was refined as the coding scheme evolved during the analysis. After completing this coding session, in a next step, the codings of each transcript were compared between the three coders and discrepancies were discussed.

After this coding procedure, 452 coded segments in 65 open codes were obtained.

In the final stages of analysis, the open codes were connected into larger categories and finally into themes. In the next section these themes will be discussed in detail.

FINDINGS

The results of the analysis are presented in a consistent manner with the two research questions. Firstly, the sales-relevant skills students can develop, will be discussed. Secondly, the differences between the two competition formats – virtual and traditional – will be described for each skill set. Overall the majority of findings within the four groups were in line.

Sales relevant skills that students could develop

With regard to the first research question – developing sales-relevant skills –the findings were classified into six major skill categories. These are: communication skills, intercultural skills, personal and social skills, professional demeanor, sales acumen, and utilization of tools in sales.

Communication skills. In the interviews, communication skills were described in multiple ways, which mostly included the exchange of information or messages between people. This definition also entails the interpretation of the message. Communication consists of verbal and non-verbal components. With regard to the development of *verbal communication skills* through university sales competitions, all four groups mentioned the opportunity to learn and train how to ask relevant questions – for example by using the SPIN selling concept developed by Neil Rackham (1988) – as well as to communicate in a professional manner, which includes the ability to articulate and speak eloquently. Furthermore, students were able to enhance their ability to lead a conversation by creating and following one's agenda, and to strengthen their skill to summarize essential information at the end or beginning of a meeting. Negotiation of price, presentation of value/benefit of a specific solution, as well as pitching a product were also indicated to be major skills trained in the event. In addition, the majority of competitors being non-native speakers drew benefit from communicating in English throughout the entire event.

The preparation and participation in a university sales competition also supports the development and strengthening of *non-verbal communication skills*. In this area students get the chance to improve their use of body language and micro expressions by receiving feedback on their appearance. Moreover, participants train to listen actively, as it is crucial to absorb all relevant information to understand customers' pain points and needs.

Furthermore, students can improve their overall flexibility during a sales talk and their ability to adapt to the counterpart's communication style. This means that one is trained to react to the information received – both verbally and non-verbally – and adapt one's own strategy.

Intercultural skills. Intercultural skills in this context are the ability to understand cultural differences in communication and the reflection on one's personal communication behavior. Former participants highlighted the chance to develop the ability to adapt to other cultures' communication style. This skill is particularly important in the European context, as the majority of the 40-plus European countries heavily depend on exports and international business (export of goods & services in % of GDP: Germany 47%, UK 30%, in contrast to the US 12%; The World Bank Group, 2020).

Personal and social skills. All groups describe opportunities to grow in the area of personal and social skills to some extent. This includes the courage to be outgoing – especially for participants who consider

themselves shy – as well as improved self-trust. In addition, educators and company representatives reported the possibility to grow as a person, the sales competition being *“an unfamiliar environment, that definitely stretches and grows you”* (Susan, Educator). The chance to learn how to work and cooperate as a team was mentioned, too.

Professional demeanor. Professional demeanor is how one conducts oneself in a business environment. During sales competitions, students are offered the chance to network with all relevant stakeholders, possibly do a business trip for the first time, as well as gain practice in sales talks. Moreover, they are believed to improve their time management and ability to prioritize during timed conversations.

Sales acumen. This category covers knowledge gained in the area of strategic B2B sales. It includes opportunities to improve knowledge on different selling models and sales processes, strategic understanding of a customer's business, understanding of a buyer's behavior as well as knowledge on CRM systems. Participants as well as educators highlighted a difference between students who have a major in sales or other comparable sales experience, versus those with little to no prior knowledge on this matter. The latter were found to improve greatly in this area due to the wider scope of information left to learn about sales.

Utilization of tools in sales. Lastly, the utilization of digital and non-digital tools in sales such as PowerPoint presentations or brochures were mentioned by sales educators. As Liam, an educator, explains: *“I could use some dashboards, or other tools to introduce some things, I could co-create with you within the different tools”*.

Attitude and motivation towards sales. The authors would like to emphasize these two factors, of which the definite impact is unclear, yet they are believed to influence the transfer of knowledge and skills (OECD, n.d.). Attitude towards sales includes students' views, biases and beliefs about sales, whereas motivation towards sales is *“intrinsic motivation to learn more about people and sales”* (Koponen et al., 2019, p. 246). Almost all participants report a positive influence on their attitude towards sales created by their participation in a sales competition. In particular, participants described the contest to help fighting against negative stereotypes by demonstrating different types of selling and getting a better idea of the profession. As Signe, an online participant, describes: *“it changed my perception from a stereotypical one to a more nuanced, precise perception of what sales is and what they actually do”*. Whereas the prior existing negative stereotype was mostly pictured as *“arrogant people”* (Sara, offline participant) or *“the annoying person who is asking, ‘Would you buy from me?’”* (Tim, offline participant).

The motivation towards sales was reported to be impacted through the possibility to test one's personal suitability as a sales manager, as one who is able to evaluate whether this is enjoyable. This was primarily noted by students who previously had not considered sales as a career path. Moreover, positive feedback and

validation of one's career choice influenced their ambitions.

Differences between competition formats

The second research question focuses on potential differences between the two competition formats – virtual and traditional – on students' development of sales-relevant skills. Figure 1 illustrates the skill areas and the impact of the online format on the development of these. Before going into detail, it can be claimed that the central elements of the competition have remained the same for both formats. Yet everything surrounding the contest is felt to be different.

I think you still are walking through the same process. You're still speaking to buyers that you don't know what they're going to ask, what they're going to challenge you to do. What roadblocks they're going to put up for you. (Susan, educator)

Communication skills. The interviews revealed that both verbal and non-verbal communication skills were influenced by the online format. Since it was hard to read the counterpart as non-verbal cues were missing, this also had an impact on verbal communication. Students had difficulties to adapt their communication style to their counterparts. More precisely, the lack of non-verbal communication cues in the online format was reported by all participant groups as *“you didn't see much of the hands, you didn't see the feet and the body language was very hard to get and to understand”* (Johanna, online participant). As a consequence, the online setting provides students with lesser possibilities to train reading non-verbal signs and responding appropriately. Furthermore, this limitation of body language visibility not only applies when students try to read their conversation partners but also vice versa. Educators and participants labelled this as a limitation of personal presentation. This includes the feeling of respondents that students were not able to show their full personality, as some signature gestures, micro expressions or personal traits are invisible online.

In addition to the above hurdle, respondents also felt that the online environment created a distance between people, which makes it *“a lot harder to get a feel for the other person”* (Aaron, offline participant), substantially hindering the crucial aspect of relationship building.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that educators as well as participants think that in an online setting the focus on the conversation and therefore on verbal communication is stronger than offline. This can be seen as both, positive and negative. On the one hand, it could imply that *“the selling itself might have been easier for the students this year because it's really just two dimensional”* (Tim, offline participant). On the other hand, online and offline participants stated that this strong focus on the talk itself made the conversation even more demanding than offline. The conversation starts immediately, as one contestant reports: *“The surprises were bigger because you had the black screen and all of a sudden there was a woman instead of a man or a new name or something”* (Johanna, online participant).

Intercultural skills. This area seems to exhibit the biggest difference between the two competition formats. This is due to the fact that knowledge about other cultures and how to interact with them is generated outside of the competition rounds through conversations and interactions with others. While social interactions and gatherings – like dinner parties or after-competition drinks – are usually a crucial part of a sales competition with plenty of opportunities to meet fellow competitors from different universities and countries, the online event was lacking such occasions. Therefore, all participant groups stated that the online competition negatively influenced the development of cultural knowledge.

Personal and social skills. The interviews revealed that a certain subgroup of students tends to benefit from an online competition format in terms of the development of personal and social skills. This particular subgroup, namely shy students, reported that they felt less nervous and pressured. This feeling may be created through the distance between buyer and students in the competition rounds as well as the lack of evidence that people were watching them as the judges had no videos on. In addition, it was perceived to be easier for this specific group to present and ask questions as well as to overcome their stage fright. As one student says: “I’m really, really nervous when I have to present something. And due to the fact that it was online, it was way easier for me because normally my voice is really shaky “. (Anja, online participant)

Professional demeanor. In the online format, the possibility of social gatherings and interactions with business partners was limited. This included opportunities to chat about job opportunities as well as getting professional insights and feedback from buyers and judges. However, the chance to meet potential employers and create long-lasting connections was mentioned as an important motivation to sign up for the event in the first place.

As a result of holding an online competition, students were lacking the experience of a business gathering and meeting like-minded people from all over the world face-to-face. While for some students this would have been the chance for their first business trip, for a few this would have even been the opportunity to fly to another country for the first time. Consequently, students missed this unique European Sales Competition atmosphere. As Morten, an offline participant puts it: “You meet face to face, you can share energy, and you feel the energy. And that is something that is currently and sadly lacking in the digital sales process”.

Furthermore, some participants view the competition taking place during their daily life as a distraction. They feel less focused during the competition rounds but also the keynote speeches and preparation during the event, as other projects or their daily jobs co-exist.

Sales acumen. As the analysis shows, knowledge gained about strategic B2B sales remains the same for both competition formats, likely because most of the development is done during the preparation process which was almost identical to the traditional contest.

Utilization of tools in sales. The last category includes differences in the applied tools and their chance of technical failure. Firstly, sales educators emphasized the possibility to make use of different digital tools for various application such as for example to record one’s performance in the preparation process for later-on analysis. On the other hand, educators and online participants mentioned the increased chance of technical failures on both sides – competitor and host – as one is solely dependent on digital solutions.

Attitude and motivation towards sales. No differences were found for these categories.

Furthermore, besides the skill sets that students may develop in a university sales competition, the online format provides additional contemporary skills such as the possibility to prepare for the new work environment. Additionally, it leads to increased accessibility and increased flexibility. This new work situation was especially emphasized by company representatives who described online sales talks to be the new standard in B2B sales and are believed to stay relevant also in the post-pandemic era. More precisely, they assume that after COVID-19 some sales meetings will go back to be held face-to-face, whereas many will remain online.

I believe that this [an online university sales competition] is preparing students for the new virtual sales environment. And I think this will certainly accompany us even after COVID as businesses realize that this can save them money, such as travel expenses. (Thomas, company representative)

In addition, an online competition does not only prepare students for the new work environment but also gives more participants the opportunity to compete and learn about B2B sales. Moreover, the competitors can easily join from everywhere without spending time or money to travel to the venue. This provides an opportunity to participate for students from more distant universities and with fewer financial resources. Additionally, with the increase in competitors and universities, the idea of the competition is spreading further and at an increasing pace.

Participants also added that the online format gives more flexibility. Each student needs to use precisely the amount of time for their personal time slot, only. And as the competition takes place during one’s daily life, other tasks or projects may be carried out at the same time.

DISCUSSION

The teaching method *university sales competitions* can be found in various formats in the US and Europe. For students it often marks an important and unforgettable part of their university education – the icing on the cake (“It was hands on the best experience in school I’ve had”, Tim, participant offline). For companies, who participate as sponsors or corporate partners, it is a great recruiting opportunity to spot sales talents. “The scenarios represent the reality. You cannot make it more realistic than the ESC does”. (Anastasia, company representative)

Traditionally university sales competitions were held on campuses. However, the pandemic also led to transferring competitions such as the ESC into the online format.

The findings of this study allow the authors to conclude, that virtual sales competitions are an impactful way to prepare students for the challenging sales environment. Although at the time the ESC was carried out, not every student and teacher had been familiar with the tools for an online sales talk, it was still possible to run a virtual competition similar to the traditional form.

Online sales competition prepares students for the new work environment in sales. Digital sales is considered to increase even after the pandemic is over and become the new standard in B2B sales. A recent study carried out by McKinsey reveals that 90% of B2B sales interactions moved to video/phone/web tools during the pandemic with more than half of the respondents believing this to be more effective than sales models used before COVID-19 (Gavin et al., 2020).

In the following, based on our findings we like to provide educators with several suggestions on how to utilize virtual sales competitions and what to consider when preparing students for the new work environment to come.

- *Relationship building* happens during communication and is a crucial aspect in B2B selling. The virtual competition has shown some limitations in making use of verbal and non-verbal communication skills during the sales talks. It was for instance harder to build rapport and use body language online. Sales educators should therefore focus on providing students with the necessary communication skills to enable them to conduct sales talks via online tools. To the authors best knowledge, there is a lack of research on how to teach *virtual communication skills*. Consequently, we strongly suggest more research and best practice sharing in this area.

- Strengthening *professional demeanor* is a major benefit for students participating in a sales competition. During face-to-face sales competitions this skill is mainly trained by providing enough time and space for small talks with company partners, sponsors and fellow participants. This allows students to get professional insights and feedback from buyers and judges, build relationships with potential employers and discuss job opportunities. In the virtual format, these gatherings were neglected and the possibilities to meet companies and fellows was limited. During the ESC key-note speeches of sales experts and sponsors were offered. However, the possibility of interaction was limited. Universities organizing virtual sales competitions should therefore ensure enough possibilities to meet and interact apart from the sales talks. This will strengthen students' professional demeanor and offer the possibility to be observed by companies also outside the competition setting. Such an

opportunity might also encourage companies to participate as sponsors.

- Participants of the virtual sales competition reported a fear of technical failure even in areas with a good internet connection. Reason being, the authors assume that at the time of the sales competition, communication via online tools was still a new terrain. Even though most students might be technically-savvy now, as educators we still see students struggling with tools. We therefore encourage our fellow colleagues to train students on how to *utilize online tools* in sales professionally. This includes instructions on virtual self-presentation such as how to adjust the camera, the light, and which background to use. It also covers training on sharing slides or material online and designing the material used.

- The sales profession will include virtual and face-to-face components in the future. Thus, both competition formats are very important. In the last months, hosting an online sales competition was rather a forced act than a planned, voluntary decision to respond to the changing business practices in general. In the future, the issue for educators will not be *either or* but rather *both*. Sales educators need to find an appropriate mode to prepare students for all aspects of a future sales position. That includes providing students with the skills for establishing personal contacts as well as having a crucial sales meeting online, and more importantly, preparing students when to use which method.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As many research projects, our study has limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Firstly, the data was gathered at the European Sales Competition that consists of an international body of participants. Given the fact that this is a transnational competition format, some of the findings (e.g. the intercultural aspect of sales) may not be transferable to a national competition. Secondly, the format of the ESC solely includes one-on-one sales talks of the contestant with several stakeholders of the company. It excludes team settings that are part of some national sales competitions in the US. However, the different settings in sales talks could be a promising field for future research; in particular, when it comes to team settings in an online sales talk. To the best of our knowledge that aspect has not been covered by academics in sales education so far.

Since our paper encourages sales educators to prepare students for the Next Normal in sales, there is a need for more academic research in sales education. This may include best-practice on hosting online sales competitions, teaching sales courses with online-focus, and studies on how to best combine off- and online settings.

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Appendix

Table I: Sample description

Educator			Judge, company representative			Student, Participant offline			Student, Participant online		
Nr.	Name*	Nationality	Nr.	Name*	Nationality	Nr.	Name*	Nationality	Nr.	Name*	Nationality
1	Kristoffer	Norway	7	Anastasia	Russia	10	Sara	The Netherlands	16	Farid	Syria
2	Emir	Turkey	8	Thomas	Austria	11	Marta	Slovakia	17	Johanna	Austria
3	Anne	The Netherlands	9	Matteo	Switzerland	12	Olav	Norway	18	Signe	Denmark
4	Liam	Finland				13	Aaron	Finland	19	Thijs	The Netherlands
5	Susan	USA				14	Tim	Germany	20	Marie	Austria
6	Jelmer	The Netherlands				15	Morten	Norway	21	Hugo	France
									22	Emma	The Netherlands
									23	Anja	Germany

Note: *Names are changed to assure anonymity

Figure 1: Skill areas and the impact of the online format on their development

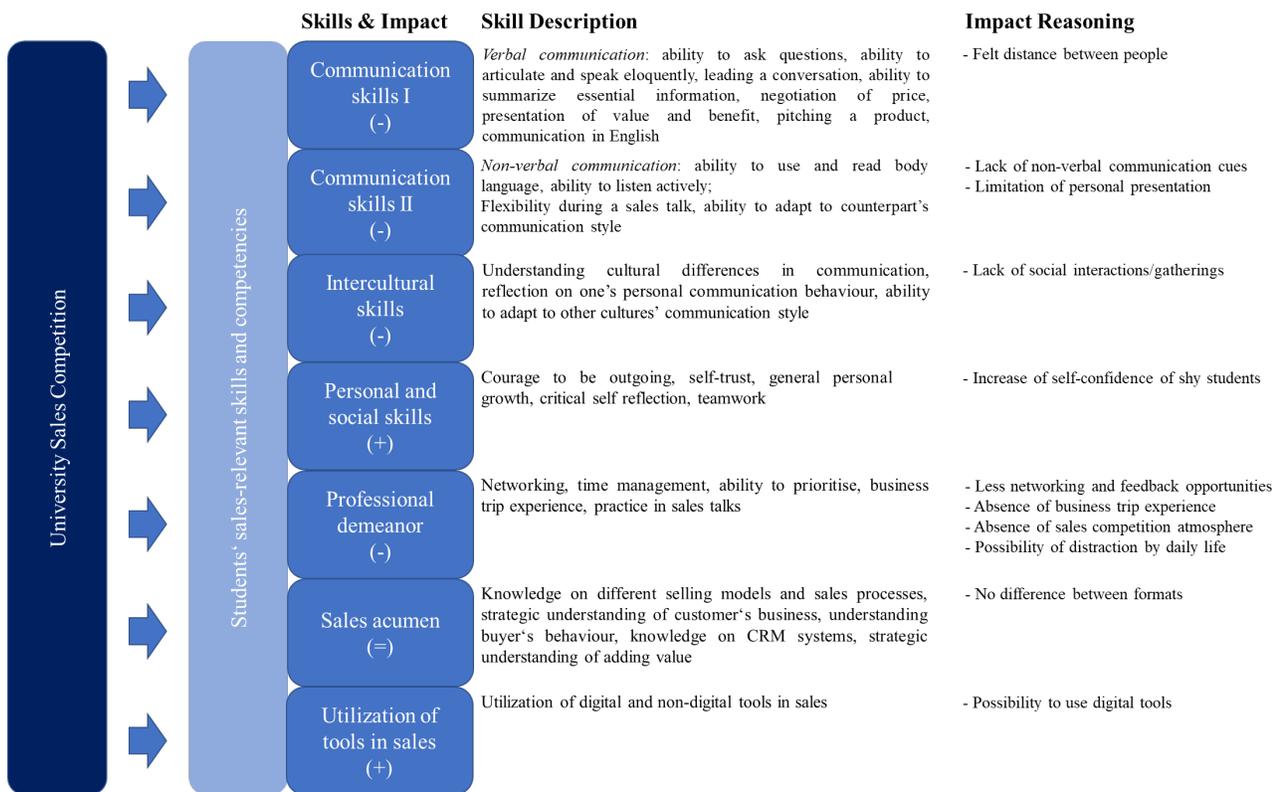


Table II: Codes, subcategories and counts

Count	Subcategory – Skills developed/strengthened	Category	Subcategory – Differences competition format	Count
15	Ability to ask questions	Verbal communication skills	Focus on conversation is stronger	8
8	Negotiation skills			
7	Ability to articulate and speak eloquently			
6	Presentation skills			
4	Leading a conversation			
4	Ability to summarize essential information			
3	Communication in English			

Count	Subcategory – Skills developed/strengthened	Category	Subcategory – Differences competition format	Count
2	Pitching a product	Verbal communication skills		
11	Active listening	Non-verbal communication skills	Non-verbal communication cues lacking	9
2	Ability to use and read body language		Limitation of personal presentation	7
11	Ability to adapt communication style	Other communication skills	Felt distance between people	8
6	Flexibility during sales talk			
16	Understanding cultural differences	Intercultural skills	Social interactions/gatherings missing	24
8	Reflecting on personal communication behavior		Development of cultural knowledge is hindered	7
3	Ability to adapt to other cultures'			
7	Courage to be outgoing	Personal and social skills	(Shy) students are less nervous/pressured	10
5	Self-trust			
3	Personal Growth			
2	Critical self-reflection			
2	Teamwork			
14	Practice in sales talks	Professional demeanor	Less networking possibilities	15
11	Business trip experience		Experience of business trip missing	11
8	Networking		Sales Competition Atmosphere missing	9
3	Time management		Distraction by daily life responsibilities	5
2	Ability to prioritize		Less feedback opportunities	3
17	Knowledge on selling models and sales processes	Sales acumen		
6	Strategic understanding of customer's business			
5	Understanding buyer's behavior			
3	Knowledge on CRM systems			
3	Strategic understanding of adding value			
3	-	Utilization of tools in sales	Possibility to use digital tools	6
			Fear of technical failure	4
10	Helps fighting negative stereotypes	Attitude towards sales		
8	Shows different types of selling			
7	Clearer picture about sales			
6	Possibility to test personal fit	Motivation towards sales		
4	Validating their career choice			
2	Generating positive feedback			

Table III: Group comparison – subcategory skills developed/strengthened

Category	Subcategory – Skills developed/strengthened	Weighted % based on number of documents per group				
		Educator (6)	Judge, Company representative (3)	Student, Participant offline (6)	Student, Participant online (8)	Total (23)
Verbal communication skills	Ability to ask questions	50.0%	33.3%	66.7%	37.5%	47.8%
	Negotiation skills	50.0%	-	33.3%	-	21.7%
	Ability to articulate and speak eloquently	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	12.5%	21.7%
	Presentation skills	50.0%	-	16.7%	12.5%	21.7%
	Leading a conversation	33.3%	-	16.7%	12.5%	17.4%
	Ability to summarize essential information	16.7%	33.3%	16.7%	-	13.0%
	Communication in English	16.7%	-	-	25.0%	13.0%
Pitching a product	-	-	33.3%	-	8.7%	

		Weighted % based on number of documents per group				
Category	Subcategory – Skills developed/strengthened	Educator (6)	Judge, Company representative (3)	Student, Participant offline (6)	Student, Participant online (8)	Total (23)
Non-verbal communication skills	Active listening	66.7%	33.3%	-	37.5%	34.8%
	Ability to use and read body language	16.7%	-	-	12.5%	8.7%
Other communication skills	Ability to adapt communication style	16.7%	-	50.0%	37.5%	30.4%
	Flexibility during sales talk	-	33.3%	33.3%	37.5%	26.1%
Intercultural skills	Understanding cultural differences	66.7%	66.7%	100.0%	25.0%	60.1%
	Reflecting on personal communication behavior	33.3%	66.7%	-	12.5%	21.7%
	Ability to adapt to other cultures'	-	-	16.7%	12.5%	8.7%
Personal and social skills	Courage to be outgoing	50.0%	33.3%	-	25.0%	26.1%
	Self-trust	16.7%	66.7%	-	12.5%	17.4%
Personal and social skills	Personal Growth	33.3%	33.3%	-	-	13.0%
	Critical self-reflection	33.3%	-	-	-	8.7%
	Teamwork	16.7%	-	16.7%	-	8.7%
Professional demeanor	Practice in sales talks	66.7%	100.0%	16.7%	-	34.8%
	Business trip experience	50.0%	-	33.3%	50.0%	39.1%
	Networking	50.0%	66.7%	-	12.5%	26.1%
	Time management	16.7%	-	-	12.5%	8.7%
	Ability to prioritize	-	66.7%	-	-	8.7%
Sales acumen	Knowledge on different selling models and sales processes	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	62.5%	39.1%
	Strategic understanding of customer's business	16.7%	66.7%	33.3%	-	21.7%
	Understanding buyer's behavior	16.7%	33.3%	-	25.0%	17.4%
	Knowledge on CRM systems	16.7%	-	16.7%	12.5%	13.0%
	Strategic understanding of adding value	-	-	16.7%	25.0%	13.0%
Utilization of tools in sales		33.3%	-	-	-	8.7%
Attitude towards sales	Helps fighting negative stereotypes	50.0%	33.3%	33.3%	25.0%	34.8%
	Shows different types of selling	-	-	66.7%	37.5%	30.4%
	Clearer picture about sales	16.7%	-	66.7%	12.5%	26.1%
Motivation towards sales	Possibility to test personal fit	-	66.7%	33.3%	12.5%	21.7%
	Validating their career choice	33.3%	-	-	12.5%	13.0%
	Generating positive feedback	16.7%	-	-	12.5%	8.7%

Table IV: Group comparison – subcategory differences competition format

		Weighted % based on number of documents per group				
Category	Subcategory – Differences competition format	Educator (6)	Judge, Company representative (3)	Student, Participant offline (6)	Student, Participant online (8)	Total (23)
Verbal communication skills	Focus on conversation is stronger	16.7%	-	33.3%	25.0%	21.7%
Non-verbal communication skills	Non-verbal communication cues lacking	66.7%	66.7%	16.7%	12.5%	34.8%
	Limitation of personal presentation	33.3%	-	16.7%	12.5%	17.4%
Other communication skills	Felt distance between people	50.0%	-	33.3%	12.5%	26.1%
Intercultural skills	Social interactions/gatherings missing	66.7%	33.3%	83.3%	75.0%	69.6%
	Development of cultural knowledge is hindered	50.0%	-	-	25.0%	21.7%
Personal and social skills	(Shy) students are less nervous/pressured	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%	25.0%	21.7%
Professional demeanor	Less networking possibilities	66.7%	-	66.7%	25.0%	43.5%
	Experience of business trip missing	50.0%	-	33.3%	50.0%	39.1%
	Sales Competition Atmosphere missing	33.3%	33.3%	50.0%	-	26.1%
	Distraction by daily life responsibilities	-	-	16.7%	12.5%	8.7%
	Less feedback opportunities	-	-	33.3%	12.5%	13.0%
Utilization of tools in sales	Possibility to use digital tools	33.3%	-	-	-	8.7%
	Fear of technical failure	33.3%	-	-	25.0%	17.4%