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Sales enablement: conceptualizing and developing a dynamic capability

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Abstract

Practitioners have touted sales enablement as a prominent solution to the challenges of the evolving buying and selling environments; however, empirical research on this concept is nonexistent in extant literature. Furthermore, while the pervasiveness of sales domain scholarship suggests that salespeople will continue to influence sales practice through expanded opportunities, firms must also blend the art and science of engaging customers in a profitable and sustainable manner. To address these scholarly demands, the authors designed an empirical study that conceptualizes sales enablement and offers an in-depth perspective on how organizations enable their sales force. The authors employ an ethnographic inquiry comprising various data sources, including 41 depth interviews with professionals responsible for sales enablement architecture and/or execution. Findings offer a multi-dimensional conceptualization of sales enablement and introduce a process model which explicates how firms develop sales enablement as a dynamic capability. This study expands current knowledge by offering foundational insights and advanced theories of sales enablement, while also providing strategic implications for sales organizations responding to evolving customer demands and selling environments.

Keywords Sales enablement · Resource-based view · Dynamic capabilities · Organizational learning · Change management · Technology adoption · Ethnographic Research

Introduction

Organizations largely provide a collection of resources and support activities for their salespeople; however, the mere collection of resources directed at salespeople does not automatically transform into a coordinated, cohesive, synergistic, and evolving system needed to work with rapidly evolving customers. Firms are thus increasingly embracing sales

enablement to help their sales organizations align distributed firm resources, optimize customer interactions, and reduce uncoordinated sales support activities that hinder revenue development (Gartner 2019). When firms efficiently connect the sales force and available internal resources, they can profit in the form of enhanced ability to learn via knowledge transfers, desirable customer responses, and improved business performance (Dewsnap and Jobber 2002; Guenzi and Troilo 2006).

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Sales enablement is therefore increasingly being called upon to help managers coordinate an internal response to a host of market shifts—e.g., informed buyers, growing data availability, and expanded digitization of content. This trend is evidenced in the number of firms reporting to have a sales enablement function, jumping from 25% to 61% in a five-year period of time (CSO Insights 2019), and estimates that technology spend on sales enablement will reach \$5 billion by 2021 (Lundy 2016).

Notwithstanding the practical relevance of sales enablement and the critical tasks enablement professionals perform, empirical research on this topic is silent (Peterson and Dover 2020). While emergent commentary depicts sales enablement from a people, process, and performance perspective (see Rangarajan et al. 2020), our lack of rich empirical understanding of this phenomenon is costly, as sales organizations are facing a multi-billion-dollar misallocation of resource problem. While technology spend per salesperson is rising as firms develop modern technology stacks that extend beyond customer relationship management (CRM) systems (Inside Sales 2017), and more data are being generated across sales operations teams to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of sales organizations (Salesforce Research 2018), minimal returns on these investments are being realized and salespeople are struggling to achieve their quotas (CSO Insights 2018). These realities suggest that despite technology, data, and training progressions, siloed investments are not producing the firm-wide support needed to succeed with ever-evolving buyers.

While streams of academic literature (e.g., organizational learning, change management, technology adoption, CRM) may help us understand how firms support the sales organization throughout their dynamic value creation endeavors, no one academic domain alone offers comprehensive conceptual guidance in this regard. Rather, for sales organizations to benefit from their firm's vast knowledge repositories, they need an overarching capability that can objectively coordinate intra-firm sales support resources and capacities that (in)directly contribute to the sales process (see Bolander et al. 2015; Hughes et al. 2012; Plouffe et al. 2016)—all with the singular aim of supporting revenue generating personnel. As highlighted in Fig. 1, while sales enablement may serve this purpose by seamlessly bridging such organizational processes into an overarching business strategy, our current understanding of this phenomenon remains underdeveloped and calls for academic research seek to understand its impact on the sales force (Peterson and Dover 2020; Rangarajan et al. 2020). As extant research has not empirically defined sales enablement or identified the process by which it comes about in an organization, a theoretically grounded conceptualization that resides at the intersection of multiple scholarly perspectives can provide a foundation for marketers to understand this domain.

To advance insights in these regards, we conducted an ethnographic inquiry lasting over 36 months and utilizing

multiple data sources. Drawing on our analytical insights, we define sales enablement as *an overarching dynamic capability that aligns varied firm resources to benefit the customer journey and selling productivity*. This conceptualization emerged from our analytical insights that show sales enablement is a multi-dimensional construct reflective of a firm's ability to: (a) amalgamate knowledge across varied sources to derive holistic insights and align internal processes with external conditions (i.e., insight triangulation), (b) develop a centralized hub of coordinated insights and a channel to serve the sales force (i.e., enablement infrastructure), and (c) orchestrate revenue generating inputs and outputs to improve sales effectiveness and efficiency (i.e., sales support envelopment). Further, we elucidate a multi-stage process for firms to cultivate sales enablement and operationalize a centralized and integrated infrastructure that allows for coordinated sales support.

Developing an empirically derived understanding of sales enablement provides important theoretical contributions. First, extant research suggests that today's salespeople confront many functional divides within their organizations that limit shared insights from becoming engrained in the collective sales effort (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2011; Malshe 2010). In this regard, scholars are increasingly emphasizing sellers' need to be appropriately enabled by organizational support mechanisms so they can optimally engage customers (Brodie et al. 2011; Moorman and Day 2016; Pansari and Kumar 2017; Vivek et al. 2012). With this backdrop, study findings show how sales enablement, as a dynamic capability, helps orchestrate distributed intra-firm resources and capacities into an integrative framework that synergistically helps salespeople serve customers at every stage of their journey. Theoretically, sales enablement creates linkages that alleviate bottlenecks across organizational learning, change management, and technology adoption/ CRM processes to provide optimal sales support on an ongoing basis. Second, from a resource-based view (RBV) perspective, conceptualization and explication of sales enablement as a dynamic capability clarifies how firms bring multiple capabilities together (e.g., specialized marketing, cross-functional, architectural, CRM, selling) in order to coordinate their resources and direct them towards sustainable competitive advantages (Morgan 2012). In highlighting how sales enablement brings together such knowledge-based processes, we theoretically extend marketing capability repertoires and cursory assessments of selling capabilities. Our explication of sales enablement reveals that it is not a sum of the siloed parts, but rather an advantage stemming from the reconfiguration of how the organization structures itself internally, works cross-functionally, and answers to both the C-suite and the marketplace simultaneously.

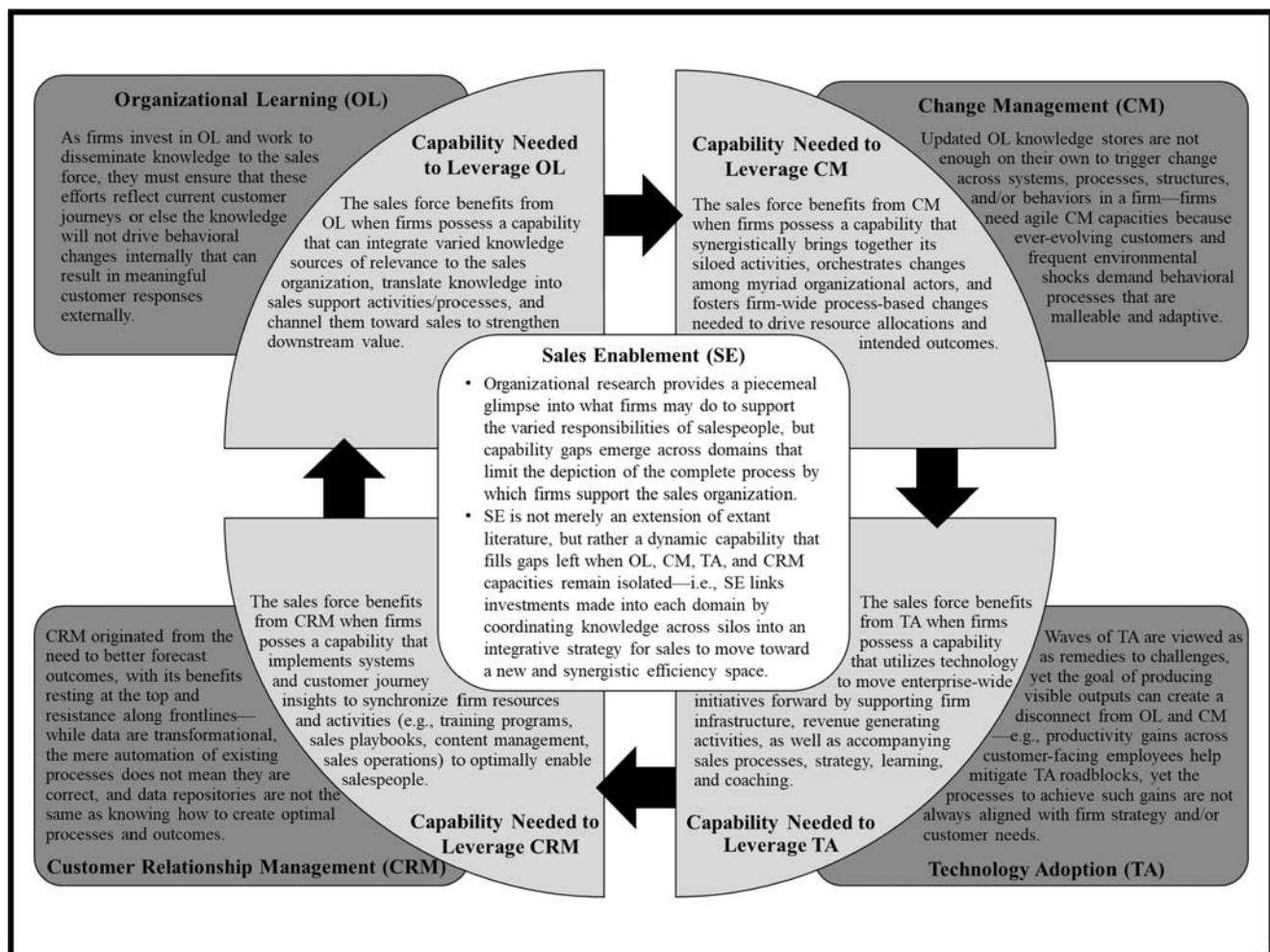


Fig. 1 Organizational capability needs and sales enablement research schema, See Table 1 for supporting OL, CM, TA, and CRM literature

Theoretical framework and literature review

As the nature of buyer–seller relationships has evolved, contemporary sales organizations work simultaneously with several intra-firm functions in their selling and value creation endeavors to holistically match today’s complex buying processes (Hartmann et al. 2018). However, enabling frontline personnel to deliver superior value to customer stakeholders is easier said than done. While extant research has investigated disparate activities that can help frontline salespeople (e.g., knowledge generation on the frontline, knowledge transfer within the firm, translation of knowledge into insights) and piecemeal inter-organizational practices that contribute to a firm’s sales process (e.g., inter-functional collaboration and coordination), a firm-level dynamic capability that can seamlessly align these varied domains remains theoretically underdeveloped. Based on our practical understanding, sales enablement holds the potential to serve as a bridging mechanism that allows organizations to enact such knowledge-driven, targeted change; “it is the coordination of these disparate

elements into an overarching business strategy for optimizing sales performance that make sales enablement an emerging force in the sales landscape, and not a mere repackaging of often-studied concepts” (Rangarajan et al. 2020, p. 1). In this section, we review extant scholarship on relevant organizational theories, activities, and processes that form the building blocks of the sales enablement phenomenon.

RBV and dynamic marketing capabilities

The RBV offers a relevant perspective by which firms can centrally support customer-facing functions to subsequently meet organizational end goals. Specifically, the RBV explores how resources (i.e., assets and capabilities) create competitive advantage and superior performance (Clulow et al. 2007). Firms can build a sustainable advantage by implementing strategies that meet customer needs in a way that competitors are unable to duplicate (Barney 1991). While competitive resources can provide a baseline benefit, complementary capabilities are essential to deploying resources under specified

market conditions (c.f., Helfat and Raubitschek 2000; Teece et al. 1997). This sentiment reflects a dynamic capabilities perspective of the RBV, the process by which the firm transforms resources into realized marketplace value offerings (Morgan 2012).

Dynamic capabilities theory postulates that marketplaces are volatile and heterogeneous regarding resource endowments. The capabilities that firms use to acquire and deploy resources allow them to match resource dispersion with market conditions, thus explaining performance variance (e.g., Morgan 2012; Teece et al. 1997). This progressive process unfolds through individuals and groups within the organization who acquire, combine, and transform resources in alliance with strategic organizational goals (Mahoney and Pandian 1992; Teece et al. 1997). Thus, while capabilities generally involve embedding skills and knowledge within organizational routines (Winter 2000), capabilities take on a dynamic element when the firm can implement new strategies that reflect marketplace conditions (Morgan 2012; Teece et al. 1997).

Organizational research

Organizational research focused on learning and change management provides one of the building blocks to understanding the sales enablement phenomenon. Organizational learning is conceived of as developing new knowledge or insights with the potential to influence behavior (Huber 1991; Hurley and Hult 1998). Such perspectives emerge from across organizational stakeholders and can be directed toward various firm functions (e.g., sales; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007). Relatedly, knowledge management is also critical for firms leveraging complementary skills and pooled intelligence across functions (see Arnett et al. 2005) to increase the speed of learning, enhance competencies, and offer better customer solutions (Arnett and Badrinarayanan 2005; Mengüç et al. 2013). These outcomes result from mutual learning and inter-unit cooperation that help salespeople become more knowledgeable, broad-thinking, and able to meet customer needs (Yang et al. 2011).

As such, organizational learning is essential to promoting behavioral adjustments on the frontline—i.e., changes that occur as the organization acquires knowledge are at the core of organizational learning (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011). However, as identified within change management literature, imposing requisite realignment to provide competitive advantages with customers is not a given, and what is required for change is often unclear (Colletti and Chonko 1997). The interrelated factors of coordination, commitment, and competencies are needed (Colletti and Chonko 1997) to initiate company-wide transformations that align internal and external events (Raineri 2011). Individuals working in new ways to implement desired changes may also increase operational

efficiency and effectiveness (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999; Ye et al. 2007); however, driving sustained changes within the sales organizations is often elusive.

As we piece together these elements of organizational research, we learn that information-based resources must be shared and/or combined within the firm and market insights must inform sales support activities. Market success, in turn, relies on the firm's improved ability to manage knowledge flow from the field force to the firm, within the firm as knowledge is combined, and from the firm back to the field. To enhance the support that each function offers to the sales force, a centralized hub is essential to producing shared identification to drive change and to linking change to performance outcomes. Relatedly, as organizational knowledge is embedded across various data repositories (e.g., individuals, routines, transactive memory systems; Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011) and changes to interfacing activities are facilitated by technical knowledge resources (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999), firms need to extend their databases that conventionally store knowledge (e.g., CRM) and facilitate the adoption of technology used to share burgeoning data. However, current literature only partially explains the nature of such coordination that may be used to enable the sales force (see Table 1).

Our knowledge of the RBV, when juxtaposed against both the overlapping and distinct research reviewed in Table 1, holistically suggests that sales enablement may exist at the intersection of these multiple theoretical domains. At the same time, theoretical knowledge on the nature of sales enablement and its developmental emergence within organizations remain unclear. Hence, we investigate the following research questions: What are the essential building blocks of sales enablement (RQ1)? How do organizations develop sales enablement (RQ2)?

Methodology

We conducted an ethnographic inquiry (c.f., Weijs et al. 2018) spanning more than 36 months to examine our research questions. Our choice of ethnography as a methodology is appropriate since it allows for long-term immersion within relevant contexts where the focal phenomenon—which we know little about theoretically—unfolds (Deshpande and Webster 1989; Strauss 1990).

Research activities

Consistent with ethnographic research traditions (Bernard 1988; Campbell and Fiske 1959), we employed multiple methods of data collection. We began with extensive fieldwork, which allowed for participant observation and contextual immersion. We subsequently complemented our

Table 1 Review of literature

Related Constructs	Conceptualization	Key insights	Assessments within marketing and sales	Gaps extended by sales enablement (SE)
Organizational Learning (OL)	OL is a change in the organization that occurs as the firm acquires experience—dynamic organizational experiences interact with context to create knowledge (i.e., reflexivity) as well as drive learning, behaviors, collaboration, and long-term success (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011; Huber 1991; Hurley 1998)	Knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organizational memory critical due to distributed work arrangements, multi-functional tasks, and inter-organizational relationships (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011; Sinkula 1994) All firm stakeholders contribute to learning, which persists despite turnover and passage of time (Cravens 1998; Levitt and March 1988) OL encourages groups to achieve organizational goals through positive interactions and information exchanges across departments—creating organizational memory to guide individual and organizational actions (Sinkula 1994) Information technology useful for converting OL into competencies valued by customers (Real et al. 2006)	Interplay with innovation, market orientation, marketing capabilities, and CRM (Bell et al. 2002; Hurley and Hult 1998) Sales-marketing interfaces (cross-functional learning) (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007; Malshe and Al-Khatib 2017) Salesperson learning (Bell et al. 2010)	OL works to the extent to which the information disseminated is of value to both internal and external stakeholders—SE amplifies OL by aligning insights with customer journeys in order to support meaningful sales activities and customer responses. CM must reflect the dynamic nature of the market (e.g., customers) and emergent shocks that require immediate adjustments—i.e., SE leverages both OL (market insights) and CM (new directives) to continually allocate resources, test, deploy, and optimally scale with agility. TA supports innovations that provide frontline productivity gains yet are not necessarily based on improved processes—SE complements TA by sitting between sales and other support functions, developing connection points, aiding training, and rising to the level of coordination with the design point of process gains.
Change Management (CM)	CM depicted as set of behavioral theories, strategies, and techniques aimed at the planned change of the organizational work setting to enhance individual development and improve organizational performance (Weick and Quinn 1999)	CM research focused on issues related to content, context, processes, and criterion (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999) CM stages follow sequence of unfreeze-change-refreeze—with episodic (infrequent) change following unfreeze-transition-refreeze and continuous (ongoing) change following freeze-rebalance-unfreeze (Lewin 1951; Weick and Quinn 1999) To initiate company-wide change, coordination (teamwork), commitment (effort), and competencies (newly learned) are requisite—i.e., performing different activities or performing similar activities better (Colletti and Chonko 1997)	Competitive advantages with customers and preventing sales force obsolescence (Colletti and Chonko 1997) Implementation of CM initiatives on the frontline—with variations in sales organizations creating added complexity to CM (Hurley 1998; Ye et al. 2007)	CRM stems from the need to forecast outcomes, with benefits remaining at the top of the hierarchy and resistance along the frontline—SE transforms data repositories by ensuring the automation of processes reflects an understanding how to optimize inputs and outputs. SE span across the firm and holds a learning orientation (OL) to base change processes (CM) and the adoption of sales tools (TA)—so the firm can rise above its disjointed approaches and provide synergistic sales support that provides returns across assets and investments.
Technology Adoption (TA)	Technology acceptance model (TAM) examines TA by individuals within an organization—acceptance and intention to use	Technology-task-fit theory also provides foundation for enabling conditions and mediating constructs to	Buyer–seller technology adoption (Rich et al. 2010) Salesperson use of technologies (Cascio et al. 2010; Homburg et al. 2010; Jones et al. 2002;	

Table 1 (continued)

Related Constructs	Conceptualization	Key insights	Assessments within marketing and sales	Gaps extended by sales enablement (SE)
	technology jointly determined by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Cascio et al. 2010; Davis et al. 1989)	support salesperson behaviors (Ahearne et al. 2008) TA happens over time and units go through stages (e.g., intention to use–regular use), with enthusiasm diminishing (Jelinek et al. 2006) Salespeople frequently reject new sales technologies and hierarchical signals sequentially influencing TA (Homburg et al. 2010) TA yields performance payoffs, while TA failure leads to decreases in attitudinal outcomes (Jelinek et al. 2006)	Schillewaert et al. 2005; Speier and Venkatesh 2002) Return on IT investments in sales (Ahearne et al. 2008)	
Customer Relationship Management (CRM)	CRM intertwined with firm-wide strategy involving customer focus and accompanying technologies that are central to managing customer relationships, allocating resources effectively, and overall firm success (Landry et al. 2005)	CRM applications categorized by strategic, analytical, and operational elements (Tanner et al. 2005) Customer gains derived from improved speed of response, internal synergy, value-added service, and cost savings; salesperson gains derived from improved quality selling time and customer information (Landry et al. 2005) CRM fosters information sharing between departments—outputs contingent on factors anchored at different levels of the organization (Ahearne et al. 2012) Failures to implement CRM often present when firm investments in dynamic capabilities are lacking (Maklan and Knox 2009)	Relationship marketing, market-facing technology, firm-wide focus on the customer (Saini et al. 2010; Tanner et al. 2005; Yim et al. 2004) Leveraging investments in CRM (Maklan and Knox 2009; Raman et al. 2006) Team selling (Arnett and Badrinarayanan 2005)	

fieldwork with netnography. Our data collection culminated in a series of interviews with sales enablement professionals across a diverse range of firms. Consistent with methodological approaches followed in contemporary ethnographic studies (e.g., Farny et al. 2019; Sadeh and Zilber 2019), researchers met periodically during data collection to discuss data, identify patterns, question each other's assumptions about the data and interpretation, and examine the relevance of existing theoretical frameworks with our emergent understanding of the sales enablement phenomenon. Overall, our multi-source data and flexible research design allowed us to simultaneously engage with varied perspectives on sales

enablement, which enhances the trustworthiness of our theoretical understanding of the sales enablement phenomenon (Adler and Adler 1994; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Kennedy et al. 2003). Web Appendix A offers a summative view of the employed data collection methods, each method's purpose(s), and the derived research insights.

Fieldwork Two members of the research team attended 13 Sales Enablement Society regional chapter meetings across several U.S. cities over a three-year period. Researchers also attended/participated in the Sales Enablement Society's Board of Directors monthly calls (20+ call observations, average call

time 1 h) and attended six sales enablement-related conferences. Our enduring presence in these milieus allowed us to establish rapport and engage in candid interactions with industry professionals active in our area of interest, thus glean-ing insights through observations and informal conversations (e.g., one-to-one/group conversations during lunch and/or coffee breaks at industry engagements). Such conversations also allowed us to explore participants' assessments of sales enablement practices, intra-organizational challenges/facilitators, and visions for sales enablement moving forward. Fieldwork insights were captured in extensive field notes.

Netnography Our netnographic efforts included participating in online forums hosted by the Sales Enablement Society (e.g., webinars) and engaging with industry professionals through social media (e.g., LinkedIn special interest group). We also curated sales enablement materials (e.g., white papers, book abstracts, thought leadership commentaries) and presented to industry professionals for their reactions on LinkedIn. These online interactions allowed the research team to raise questions about myriad sales enablement issues and gather participant perspectives. All interactions and observations that occurred during netnography were documented through extensive notes that provided a rich grounding in the phenomenon.

Depth interviews Our ethnographic efforts culminated in a series of in-depth interviews conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of interviews with 41 sales enablement professionals across five industries. All interviews were conducted either via phone or virtual platform (e.g., Zoom) and lasted 40–100 min. The second phase consisted of informal interviews with 20 informants. This phase aimed to ensure that we did not omit important perspectives. These interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 20–90 min. Informants in both phases were theoretically sampled based on their ability to offer insights germane to the topic of interest (Creswell 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Both phases of interviews were discovery-oriented (Deshpande 1983). Following established qualitative inquiry practices in marketing research (c.f., Homburg et al. 2014), we allowed interview informants to “tell their stories” unencumbered by any expected findings (Creswell 2007, p. 40). Table 2 provides an overview of our informant profiles.

Phase one interviews started with casual questions about our informants' work responsibilities. Once comfortable, “grand tour” questions asked for phenomenological interpretations (McCracken 1988) regarding how the sales enablement initiative unfolded. We used an interview protocol to facilitate the conversation (see Web Appendix B). Throughout the interview process, interviewees shaped the flow and content of the discussion while the researchers aimed to eliminate interviewer-induced bias (McCracken 1988)—i.e., not asking leading questions, asking clarifying questions

only when needed, and controlling non-verbal expressions to avoid conveying approval/disapproval. First-phase interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, resulting in over 45 h of audio and over 1100 pages of transcripts. Second-phase interviews were documented with extensive notes. Data collection ended once conceptual themes started repeating themselves—i.e., theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Data analysis

Given that we employed multiple sources of data during our ethnographic inquiry, we analyzed our notes from fieldwork, netnography, and informal interviews using data reduction techniques (e.g., coding, summarizing, memoing). During these processes, we carefully maintained contextual richness of the data and focused on developing a cohesive overview, along with individual dimensions of data (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). To analyze interview transcripts, we followed established qualitative practices and examined each interview to identify which ideas informants identified as critical to sales enablement. These ideas constituted in-vivo codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We then used axial coding to assess relationships among various in-vivo codes—i.e., organizing them under first-order categories and second-order themes. Web Appendix C provides an overview of the in-vivo codes, first- and second-order categories, and themes (i.e., sales enablement components) that emerged from our data. Overall, our analytical process was holistic—i.e., we analyzed all data (e.g., notes from fieldwork, netnography, informal interviews, and interview transcripts) collectively and iteratively until all possible data relationships were identified. Throughout our analysis, we actively resisted forcing emergent patterns into preconceived categories (Gummesson 2003).

Reliability and validity

Given the variety of our data sources, we judged trustworthiness of our analyses and the resultant insights with a variety of approaches. We maintained detailed records related to all of our data and centrally stored them to verify the internal consistency of our data and conclusions (Kennedy et al. 2003). Further, we systematically identified similarities and variations in data obtained across sources, which triggered deliberations within the research team about our interpretations and called upon us to refine them when necessary. Next, we randomly selected 19 interviews from our data and asked an independent judge familiar with qualitative research technique yet not formally involved with our project to evaluate our coding and insights. There was significant consistency on both the coding and interpretations. Lastly, we ensured analytical validity by following techniques used in marketing

Table 2 Informant profile

	Name	Gender	Informant job title	Company industry	Sales force size	Sales enablement reporting structure
1	Andrew	Male	VP, Sales Engineering	Business Services	50	VP, Marketing
2	April	Female	Assoc. Dir., Practice Management	Financial Services	1100	COO
3	Ari	Male	VP, Sales Learning & Development	Research & Consulting	1000	Operations
4	Bailey	Female	Sr. Dir., Global Sales Enablement	Engineering	270	Sales
5	Benjamin	Male	Dir., Sales & Professional Training	Information Technology	300	Division President
6	Bentley	Male	VP, Sales	Research & Consulting	15	COO
7	Brittany	Female	CEO	Research & Consulting	n/a ¹	n/a
8	Camille	Female	Sr. Dir., Sales Enablement	Information Technology	2400	Operations
9	Cara	Female	Dir., Learning & Development	Business Services	90	HR
10	Christian	Male	Dir., International Enablement	Financial Services	110	Operations
11	Damon	Male	Dir., Sales Enablement	Business Services	220	Sales
12	Dean	Male	VP, GTM Strategy & Operations	Business Services	5000	Operations
13	D.J.	Male	Mgr., Sales Enablement	Information Technology	2000	Operations
14	Donna	Female	VP, Product Management Operations	Business Services	450	Sales
15	Duke	Male	Dir., Sales Readiness	Information Technology	800	Operations
16	Irene	Female	Head, Field Sales Enablement	Information Technology	3500	Marketing
17	Jamal	Male	COO	Business Services	800	CEO
18	Jonathan	Male	VP, Development & Performance	Information Technology	200	Operations
19	Jordyn	Female	Dir., Global Sales Enablement	Information Technology	175	Sales
20	Joshua	Male	SVP	Research & Consulting	3000	Sales
21	Joy	Female	Sr. Mgr., Sales Enablement	Information Technology	220	Operations
22	Julian	Male	Dir., Sales Enablement	Information Technology	2000	Marketing
23	Justin	Male	Sales Development Manager	Engineering	3	Development
24	Kamil	Male	Dir., Sales; Head, Sales Enablement	Engineering	725	VP, Sales
25	Karen	Female	Dir., Worldwide Enablement	Business Services	5000	Sales
26	Linda	Female	Dir., Global Sales Enablement	Business Services	350	Development
27	Maddox	Male	Dir., Business Development Services	Information Technology	4000	Sales
28	Mandy	Female	Dir., Strategic Solutions & Services	Information Technology	2000	HR
29	Marty	Female	VP, Global Field Enablement	Business Services	4000	Operations
30	Mia	Female	Dir., Sales Enablement	Financial Services	250	Operations
31	Morgan	Male	Business Development—N. America	Business Services	1500	Operations
32	Nancy	Female	Sales Enablement Manager	Research & Consulting	1800	Sales
33	Nicholas	Male	Regional Sales Director	Business Services	55	Sales
34	Ray	Male	VP; Global Head, Sales Enablement	Information Technology	3000	Sales
35	Robin	Male	Sr. Dir., Sales	Engineering	3	CEO
36	Sal	Male	VP, Sales & Customer Success	Business Services	450	Operations
37	Samantha	Female	VP, Sales Enablement	Business Services	125	Marketing
38	Sloan	Female	Head, Sales Enablement	Business Services	65	Sales
39	Thomas	Male	Global Head, Inside Sales	Information Technology	300	Sales
40	Trish	Female	Research Director	Research & Consulting	n/a	n/a
41	Wanda	Female	Inbound Sales Enabler	Business Services	n/a	n/a

¹ Informants for cases 7, 40, and 41 provide sales enablement services to multiple organizations, thus a singular sales force size or sales enablement reporting structure was not available (n/a)

research (see Malshe and Sohi 2009). Web Appendix D provides an overview of the procedures used to ensure trustworthiness (i.e., reduce biases) and details how they were applied in this study.

Findings

Our findings detail the conceptualization of sales enablement as a multi-faceted phenomenon and explicate the stages of the

intensive, iterative process that firms engage in as they translate the sales enablement philosophy into an organizational reality. Figure 2 provides an illustrative overview of our conceptualization and process model. Table 3 provides a granular view of our emergent sales enablement components and stages, including supplemental sources of ethnographic support (see column “Evidence from Ethnographic Data”) and an analysis of interview informant emphasis (see column “% of Interviews”).

Sales enablement conceptualization

While our informants across all data sources held varied perspectives on sales enablement, three seminal insights emerged: (a) synergistic assimilation and channeling of disparate intra-firm sales support resources and capabilities to improve sales metrics; (b) dedicated focus on supporting salespeople (with various sales experience) with the aim of aligning sales activities with customer journeys; and (c) a meta-capability that is larger than the individual or sum of the varied organizational capabilities that it seamlessly integrates (e.g., organizational learning, knowledge management, CRM). Drawing upon these ideas, we postulate that sales enablement is an overarching dynamic capability that aligns varied firm resources to benefit the customer journey and selling productivity. This capability is reflected in three components: insight triangulation, enablement infrastructure, and sales support envelopment.

Insight triangulation Firms access a wide range of knowledge sources and data points every day—e.g., records of customer

response tendencies, sales personnel activities, and internal resource utilization metrics. Our data suggest that insight triangulation, the first component of sales enablement, is manifested in firms’ ability to integrate divergent data points related to the: (a) customer journey evolution (i.e., customer journey assessment), (b) alignment between extant sales approaches and customer needs (i.e., sales process assessment), and (c) engagement of internal support activities shaping the sales processes (i.e., sales support assessment). The quote below highlights the multi-focal nature of this activity. Specifically, a sales enablement leader assessed their sales processes in the context of changing customer demand, which subsequently helped them to identify focal areas to better support salespeople.

He did a small study about two and a half years ago with the enterprise sales group that yielded some interesting results. It uncovered that our enterprise guys face a serious challenge in terms of their customer requirements changing and the amount of time they spend per customer. By applying that learning to a larger population, it helped us identify where and how they spend their time, and where they could be more effective. That helped us prioritize the areas where we need to focus our attention right out of the gate. [*Kamil / 24 – Director, Sales; Head, Sales Enablement*]

Many firms in our data had robust CRM systems that allowed for deeper insights into how customer journeys may evolve. For example, during our fieldwork, regional conference participants shared how examining customer journeys

Fig. 2 Sales enablement process model, Inner (pie) portion of figure represents sales enablement conceptualization (i.e., higher-order components, lower-order components), Outer (process) portion of figure represents sales enablement process model (i.e., process stages)

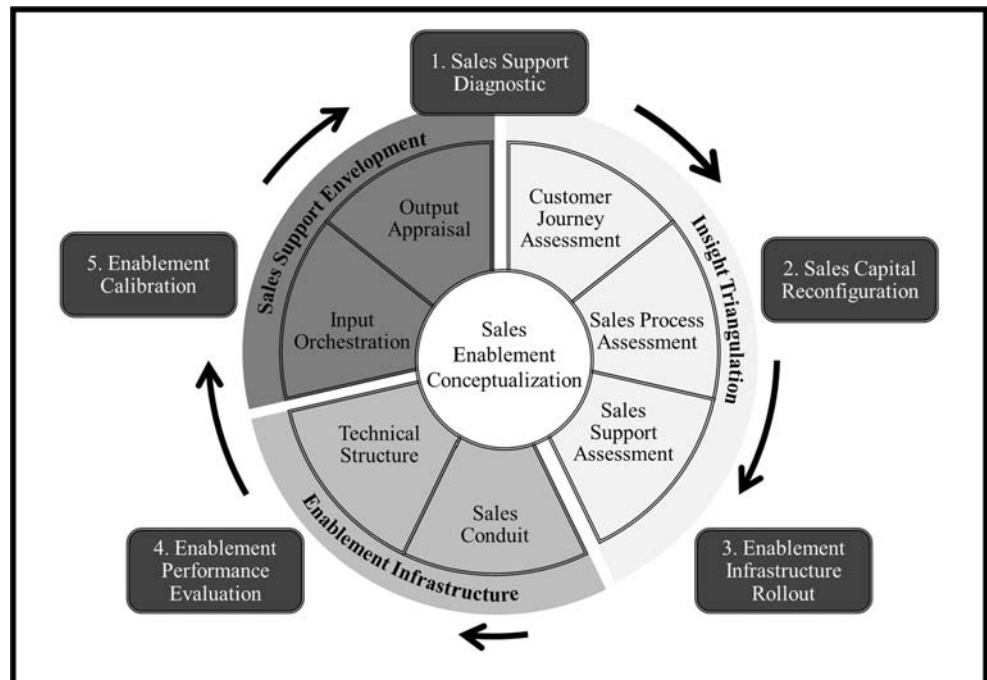


Table 3 Ethnographic support for sales enablement components and stages

Higher-order components	Lower-order components	Evidence from ethnographic data ^a	% of Interviews ^b
Insight Triangulation	Customer Journey Assessment—monitoring nature of customer journeys and their evolution	Increased buying complexity and changes to engagement / decision making processes (SC)	Overall: 76%
	Sales Process Assessment—examining alignment of sales processes with current customer needs	Customers are constantly realigning and moving further away from being linear (QU)	BS (80%); FS (33%); RC (83%); IT (85%); ENG (50%)
	Sales Support Assessment—evaluating how intra-firm entities support salespeople / sales processes	Salespeople aware of customer changes—in need of systems-level perspective (OB)	
Enablement Infrastructure	Technical Structure—infrastructure facilitating integration of technology platforms and organizational structures/processes	Sales enablement (SE) platforms improve sales-marketing collaboration / processes (IC)	Overall: 78%
	Sales Conduit—infrastructure steadfastly channels entities that help the sales force achieve objectives	SE must help sales conversations across entirety of sales cycle (NN)	BS (87%); FS (100%); RC (67%); IT (77%); ENG (50%)
Sales Support Envelopment	Input Orchestration—synchronizing disjointed inputs emanating from multiple intra-firm entities	SE must build / manage relationships across customer functions—drive internal / external partner programs that address skill gaps (NN)	Overall: 73%
	Output Appraisal—extracting downstream effects incurred through resource utilization of inputs	SE improves discipline around sales force support (NN)	BS (67%); FS (67%); RC (67%); IT (85%); ENG (75%)
Process Stages	Deconstructing Stages	Evidence from Ethnographic Data	% of Interviews
Sales Support Diagnostic	Insights from purposeful assessment of extant sales support detect the need to reconfigure sales capital	Assessments reveal disjointed sales support resources (OB)	Overall: 71%
	Admission of evident and urgent need to better support sales with capital—i.e., enable salespeople to aid customers in their journey	Diagnostic of existing processes takes time, yet provides key reconfiguration input (IC)	BS (80%); FS (33%); RC (50%); IT (77%); ENG (75%)
Sales Capital Reconfiguration	Sales capital inclusive of intra-firm resources and process-based capacities that support sales force	Audits must address weaknesses in sales support resource allocation (OB)	
	Realignment of resources and capabilities through merging, acquiring, divesting, and/or organizing	Aligning people/processes/priorities with coaching/learning is critical to ensuring field force is properly focused (OB)	Overall: 76%
Enablement Infrastructure Rollout	Primary aim is centralized enablement support infrastructure	SE is a “silo buster or reducer” (IC)	BS (87%); FS (67%); RC (50%); IT (85%); ENG (50%)
	Formal/phased introduction of SE infrastructure and processes	Reconfiguration “easier said than done” (IC)—but helped one firm retire 80% of wasted content (NN)	Overall: 63%
Enablement Performance Evaluation	SE leaders work to actively secure input and buy-in across levels and functions—i.e., mitigate inertia	Without sales manager buy-in, you have nothing (QU)	
	Reinforcement of activities critical beyond rollout in order to institutionalize/sustain SE	Building a coalition of support across key stakeholders for SE to take root in firm (IC)	BS (73%); FS (67%); RC (33%); IT (69%); ENG (50%)
Enablement Calibration	Evaluation of ROI and firm benefits resulting from investments made to develop SE capability	SE not a magic pill—complete transformation process and real work must be done (QU)	Overall: 63%
	Evaluation consists of both process-based and outcome-based parameters	Measurement and accountability crucial for SE success (SC)—as well as proving value within firm (NN)	BS (73%); FS (33%); RC (33%); IT (77%); ENG (50%)
Enablement Calibration	Intra-firm effort to fine-tune SE process—informed by measurement of outcomes achieved	SE leaders must show that their work is important and makes a visible difference (SC)	Overall: 63%
	Calibration critical to keeping enablement infrastructure current so it can serve sellers’ evolving needs—i.e., feedback loop	What gets measured gets improved (SC)	
		We monitor everything we can, but we work within existing KPIs. Nobody wants to overburden the system with more compliance requests/demands (QU)	BS (67%); FS (33%); RC (50%); IT (69%); ENG (75%)

^a SC = speaker commentary at SE society/conference/chapter meeting/board; QU = quote from interview informant; OB = observation; IC = informal comment heard/read; NN = netnography insight (e.g., post comment, webinar, discussion forum)

^b % of Interviews = percentage of interview informants ($n = 41$) who supported each component/stage in our findings (c.f., Macdonald et al. 2016); Industries: BS = business services ($n = 15$); FS = financial services ($n = 3$); RC = research & consulting ($n = 6$); IT = information technology ($n = 13$); ENG = engineering ($n = 4$)

helped their firms “identify the impact of red tape” within customer buying patterns (e.g., speed of decision making). Although our informants stressed the importance of CRM systems in housing customer insights, they categorically mentioned that such systems alone are not adequate in enabling salespeople. Rather, firms need complementary abilities to use such insights and translate them into actions that help support salespeople.

Our CRM is a big giant repository of stuff and I think it’s been designed so that marketing has a place to put their stuff—rather than a system that’s going to drive sales productivity. What we need is a bigger apparatus that can bring stuff from CRM and integrate it with other systems and processes so the CRM insights and other resources can be combined and translated into actions. Our enablement apparatus allows us to do the translation. *[Camille/8 – Senior Director, Sales Enablement]*

Customer journey insights need to be disseminated throughout the entire organization for them to help in enabling salespeople. This aspect was reinforced by an informant below who discussed how organizational silos may limit the firm-wide dissemination of such insights, thereby limiting firms’ ability to respond to changing customer expectations in a timely manner.

Companies are still operating with beautiful silos—as if customers have not changed dramatically in the last five years—and their go-to-market strategy is still the same. With a couple of tweaks, you realize you need to start packing silos down and facing the customer in a heck of lot better manner than we have done in the past or else your competition is going to eat your lunch. It’s amazing that some people haven’t gotten that memo. They [customers] are demanding and expecting a heck of a lot more of your sales team, so we had better have a realistic understanding of their buying journey. *[Karen/25 – Director, Worldwide Enablement]*

Sales process assessment, the second facet of insight triangulation, reflects the firm’s evaluation of whether its existing sales approaches align with the customer journey insights it possesses. Sales enablement conference participants emphasized how important this element is during informal conversations, noting how it revealed that “sales reps connect the dots across the selling and buying organization” and “those salespeople who run their standard sales playbook, when the customer already identified their need, will appear out of touch.” A quote from one of our interview informants further illustrates how sales process assessment revealed that his firm needs to rethink the utility of its salespeople’s relationship-building activities—and what it would

mean for them to modify their sales processes to meet changing customer needs.

It is challenging to get a legacy relationship sales team to become a sales team that penetrates in a newfangled world where the technology integrates into the businesses nowadays. It used to be that they [salespeople] would go to dinners, play golf, or whatever it may be to develop a relationship and move sales on the path of it. Now, because it’s become a lot more technologically driven, we are thinking about how to get that sales team to perform [new sets of activities] at a higher level and in a different environment going forward. *[Morgan/31 – Business Development for North America]*

Sales process assessment may require firms to examine their sales processes through multiple resource-intensive lenses. The quote below highlights elements that this assessment must consider, such as process adoption by the field force, resource usage, and maturity of the process.

There are other business processes associated with sales, so we are looking at all those processes and measuring our process maturity, adoption, and resource usage because those things drive our sales effectiveness. There’s a massive project going on right now to document all those associated processes. *[Joy / 21 – Senior Manager, Sales Enablement]*

As sales processes evolve in response to the changing customer journey, firms realize the need to examine the extant support their sales force receives. Sales support assessment, the third facet of insight triangulation, reflects a process through which firms examine how various intra-firm entities (e.g., marketing, operations, training) and their work processes currently sustain and shape the sales process. Our informant explains that sales process assessment must span multiple functional- and activity-based boundaries.

The board started to scrutinize the support salespeople receive and said, “Are we really sure that we are maximizing opportunity? Are they scienced the right way? Why don’t we have sales on-boarding? What’s going on with sales training and compensation?” Lots of questions started getting asked about sales support. Things that would typically be handled within sales operations. *[Joy/21 – Senior Manager, Sales Enablement]*

Sales support assessment often reveals the disjointed nature of sales support and subsequent downstream inefficiencies. For example, during a webinar we attended, the presenter discussed how her firm’s sales support assessment revealed “friction across departments because their businesses were

organized around products, not customers, problems, or wallets.” Similarly, an attendee at a sales enablement conference encouraged like-minded firms to assess sales support by how prepared their salespeople were for “increasingly educated buyers who enter the sales funnel further along the decision-making process.” Additionally, the informant below laments about how uncoordinated sales support undermines her firm.

I think the lack of alignment in terms of how sales was supported was evident. Sales finds a way of getting what they want. They find individuals to send their ad hoc request to; whoever will get it done. But that doesn’t scale; that’s number one. Number two, it’s hard to provide resource support when individuals are off and running these little projects one-by-one. That’s inefficient. *[Samantha / 37 – Vice President, Sales Enablement]*

Viewed collectively, we learn that insight triangulation allows firms to holistically examine how support from their various functions shapes the nature of their current sales processes and influences the extent to which sales efforts remain aligned with evolving customer journeys.

Enablement infrastructure Our data show that triangulated insights shape the development of a centralized sales support foundation (i.e., enablement infrastructure), which constitutes the second dimension of the sales enablement construct. Enablement infrastructure serves as an integrative hub that brings together widely dispersed intra-firm resources, capabilities, activities, and ideas intended to help sales personnel. Below, we offer two quotes from our interview data that emphasize the integrative nature of such infrastructure.

We are the connective tissue to every move. We touch every part of the organization that touches the sales team. *[Linda / 26 – Director, Global Sales Enablement]* Sales enablement allows for the aggregation of multiple ideas and resources into a centralized viewpoint. It is like taking disparate pieces that have existed in pockets and bringing them together cohesively. *[Julian / 22 – Director, Sales Enablement]*

Enablement infrastructure must serve as an integrative hub (i.e., technical structure) and steadfastly assist the sales force (i.e., sales conduit). First, while a constantly evolving set of technology platforms that support divergent sales-related activities (e.g., lead generation, content management, email management) are integral to the enablement infrastructure, it is the ability of these platforms to integrate seamlessly that allows for the

emergence of the integrative hub. Further, this integration occurs across newly developed organizational structures (e.g., multi-functional sales enablement teams), as well as extant/emergent sales support processes (e.g., account planning, CRM, onboarding). The importance of such integration emerged at multiple data-points during our study. For example, during our fieldwork, many enablement professionals stressed the need to integrate technology tools with modified skills and new support processes. Similarly, a webinar presenter highlighted how the enablement infrastructure can aid in building the complementarity of activities such as “training, collateral development, and win/loss analysis” to better support sales personnel. An interview quote below reiterates this sentiment.

Sales enablement is not about tools and technologies alone, it is tools and technologies and systems and processes. It is the confluence of all those disciplines that enable and improve our team’s effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity—so they deliver value to their customers. It is about making it easier for salespeople to find the right information, and to deliver the right information to the right customer at the right time according to the customer’s end use. *[Kamil / 24 – Director, Sales; Head, Sales Enablement]*

As firms work to develop an enablement infrastructure that integrates a variety of technologies, resources, ideas, and processes, they must also ensure that the infrastructure is relentlessly focused on serving the sales force (i.e., sales conduit). A sales conduit channels sales force needs to a variety of intra-firm entities, coordinates sales-support inputs to help salespeople achieve their objectives, and redirects those inputs back to sellers.

You must also align those marketing assets to what I call “the seller’s journey.” You must think about the sales process and the way the salesperson is approaching it. We’re trying to make that connection back with marketing so that as they’re creating assets, they’re thinking about, “Okay, we’re going to deliver a lead to this person, and they’re expected to convert that lead into an opportunity. What are some of the sales assets that the salesperson is going to need at the different stages? Let’s make sure that those are being created to support them.” *[Cara / 9 – Director, Learning and Development]*

The need for an integrative enablement infrastructure that focuses on the sales force emerged across other data sources. Participants in our fieldwork discussed “the ongoing relevance of content housed in the infrastructure,” which was closely associated with the ease with which salespeople could

access the centralized hub and enhance their everyday activities. The quote below highlights this aspect.

There is so much content available that salespeople get lost in the puzzle when they look to find relevant information in the deal cycle. On many platforms, there are multiple stages in the sales fields. In many companies, they still don't categorize content and they don't make it easily available for sales reps to go find it. That takes away from the productivity you expect of these reps. [Sal / 36 – Vice President, Sales and Customer Success]

During our netnography, we learned about the importance of “the infrastructure’s ability to keep salespeople on message” One of the ways to do that is to ensure that the infrastructure is flexible so it can offer the right mix of support to salespeople as they implement new initiatives. The quote below drives this point home.

Imagine keeping your people current, evolving and growing their expertise, plus being able to absorb any new initiative that pops up. In a company like ours that is transforming and transitioning and trying out new stuff, it is common. We constantly try to figure out what the right mix is to get the field optimized. [Karen / 25 – Director, Worldwide Enablement]

Sales support envelopment The multi-faceted components of sales enablement—i.e., insight triangulation and enablement infrastructure—allow firms to achieve sales support envelopment, the third component within our conceptualization. Sales support envelopment reflects the firm’s ability to engender the confluence of disjointed inputs that the sales function receives on a day-to-day basis (i.e., input orchestration) and extract the relative downstream effects incurred through resource utilization (i.e., output appraisal). An interview informant used the following analogy to explicate how the convergence of inputs helps firms achieve end goals.

Picture a bunch of rowboats in the river. Each one rowing to their own cox[swain], going in their own direction. We are trying to align them so we are going the same direction, moving to the same beat of the same drum. [Benjamin / 5 – Director, Sales and Professional Training]

If the firm coordinates the cross-functional inputs salespeople receive, it can influence how salespeople interact with their customers. In the quote below, an interview informant discusses how sales enablement affords her firm the ability to

take inputs from myriad intra-functional entities and package them to improve their customer interactions.

Let’s say product team is doing a new release and they’ve got a technical way of telling salespeople what it is all about. What sales enablement does is it takes that knowledge, works with the product and training team, and channels it to develop a comprehensive plan to bring that product release to life for sales. That coordination can have an impact on how sales speaks to a customer. [Nancy / 32 – Sales Enablement Manager]

The ability to reduce disorderliness inherent to sales support processes at the salesperson- and organizational-levels is also relevant to input orchestration. When multiple firm functions lack coordination, but simultaneously expect sales to implement their programs, salespeople may actively ignore much of what is being asked of them. In the below quote, an informant narrates how sales personnel in her firm must deal with the messiness that intrudes on the sales process.

Another thing is to be the guardian because there are many parts of the organization that want salespeople to do something. Service says, “I want you to be talking about customer service,” and marketing wants them to do this, and sales ops wants them to go to the webinar. I draw a stick figure of the salesperson and all the arrows pointing at them from 360 degrees. My job is to shield them; filter and structure so it becomes an organized funnel that comes to them that they put it into context for their job. [Bailey / 4 – Senior Director, Global Sales Enablement]

While orchestrating inputs is critical, we also learned from a chapter meeting presenter about firm struggles to “combine performance support and professional development to better enable their salespeople.” Similarly, industry professionals discussed “cultural challenges” and “internal resistance” experienced when their firms tried to coordinate sales support. Thus, as the relative return on inputs are evaluated, firms employ a multi-pronged approach to assess the benefits of their sales enablement endeavors (i.e., output appraisal). For example, firms document how well their intra-firm entities support sales and the overall sales enablement effort.

I have cross-trained the entire team so there is no point of failure not documented. Every single process that they [support organizations] engage in to support sales. From writing a contract to completing an RFP for a massive government agency, there is nothing that isn’t documented in some fashion. [Christian / 10 – Director, International Enablement]

Additional sets of parameters evaluate both the internal (e.g., pipeline velocity) and external (e.g., win rate) outcomes of sales enablement efforts. Our analysis suggests that firms use both micro- and macro-level lenses to holistically appraise enablement. The quote below highlights how an informant's firm pinpoints data at multiple levels to glean a holistic picture of enablement's value.

We measure win-loss, and there's a whole bunch of variations around that—win-loss by product, by territory, by vertical. We track average deal size. We track duration length of the deals. We track all kinds of stuff on the RFP side. How long did we take to respond, what's our short-list win rate versus the correlation to our win rate? Everything we do is sliced and diced. [Donna / 14 – Vice President, Product Management Operations]

Our informants suggest that firms are focused on whether the newly developed infrastructure is increasing sales force productivity. This return-on-enablement mechanism brings together multiple facets of sales enablement into a cohesive higher-order construct.

Sales enablement in my mind is about the metrics. It's about sales force productivity. It's about knowing whether they're spending their time appropriately and effectively, and where they are completely missing the boat. To find a way to make them more efficient, more effective, and more productive. It's about productivity, and it's about making them successful. [Kamil / 24 – Director, Sales; Head, Sales Enablement]

Sales enablement process model

Our inductive analysis suggests that for firms to cultivate sales enablement as a dynamic capability and craft an infrastructure that facilitates sales support envelopment, a series of five stage-based processes must unfold. The stages converge across each dimension of sales enablement and include sales support diagnostic, sales capital reconfiguration, enablement infrastructure rollout, enablement performance evaluation, and enablement calibration. This discussion brings forth how the various steps in our process model help bridge diverse intra-firm activities to better enable salespeople.

Sales support diagnostic The first stage, sales support diagnostic, refers to managers detecting and admitting that their extant resources and methods of distribution inadequately support the sales force. Numerous presenters at sales enablement conferences stressed that firms must “learn what's going on at the frontline” because “it is dangerous to not

evolve to the changing needs of salespeople.” Our interview data suggest that this stage is often triggered when senior-level leaders ask questions that compel firms to “peel back the onion” and admit the disconnect between firms' current sales support processes and those that would better aid salespeople's output efficiency and effectiveness.

The classic question gets asked of sales leaders, “Why is it taking sales reps so long to ramp up?” That's the question that triggers these issues. You have sales leaders who are being questioned, “Why is it taking a sales rep nine months to ramp up?” They're like, “Well, we don't do a good job on training.” The follow-up question is “Okay, who's doing the training?” That's when you start to peel back the onion and realize that there is a big disconnect. [Sal / 36 – Vice President, Sales and Customer Success]

Multiple symptoms can also manifest when the sales force is weakly supported, which managers must monitor and detect expeditiously. One symptom is overwhelmed salespeople. Without coordinated behind-the-scenes efforts, salespeople become overloaded with requests (e.g., test marketing a concept) and inputs (e.g., marketing collateral) that they cannot process and/or utilize. Another symptom is an overly complex set of processes that salespeople must navigate daily. In the quote below, an informant discusses how a lack of coordination among intra-firm entities that support salespeople can result in a cumbersome sales process.

The sellers are burdened with an enormous amount of processes. Approval processes and tools and technologies that interject themselves at different points. That it really is a confusing mess for them today. [Kamil / 24 – Director, Sales; Head, Sales Enablement]

When such diagnoses reveal the gaps and negative downstream consequences within current sales support processes, leaders prioritize increased support for the sales organization and initiate the process of sales enablement. As creating optimal sales support becomes a strategic priority, firms assemble a sales enablement team that identifies how they may better reconfigure existing resources and capacities to support their sales force. One informant describes this sequence:

Our president had the vision to say, “We need a central group and I want them to drive metrics. I want them to own the management of Salesforce and we need a sales process.” Believe it or not, a company 20 years old didn't have a sales process. I was hired to drive the sales process. Then we hired a person to drive the CRM side of Salesforce. Then another to do all the metrics and territory design. We had never really done that.

[Donna / 14 – Vice President, Product Management Operations]

Sales capital reconfiguration We characterize sales capital as the intra-firm resources and process-based capacities that provide daily support to the sales organization. Examples of relevant resources include financial (e.g., budgets), marketing (e.g., marketing content), informational (e.g., competitive insights), and technological (e.g., data management technologies). Examples of relevant process-based capabilities include activities that firm functions (e.g., marketing, training, sales operations) engage in to support the sales organization. Once firms prioritize supporting their sales organization, they engage in sales capital reconfiguration, or re-aligning resources and capabilities through merging, acquiring, divesting, and/or organizing them into a centralized enablement support infrastructure.

Firms must take a systems-level perspective and make sales capital reconfiguration decisions holistically. This idea emerged during presentations and conversations at sales enablement conferences. Presenters and participants stressed that firms improve their capacities when they “take a systems view to align to new realities,” or build capabilities that integrate “resources, budgets, and governance models.” Our informants also emphasized that reconfigured sales capital must work in an integrative and synergistic manner. One informant explains how newly configured sales capital (e.g., IT, sales operations, knowledge) help salespeople in her firm:

What I’m asking of the IT function is to work collaboratively with our sales operations teams to talk about how we can together support our sellers. We’re thinking about what they need to be successful—whether that’s quick access to customer knowledge or training so they can figure out their sales play or what a solution might be. We want to provide them sales assets and resources they need to have a good conversation. All that must be integrated within a system instead of making them go to any number of places to try to get their job done. [Cara / 9 – Director, Learning and Development]

Sales capital reconfiguration often results in disparate intra-firm resources combining within a single entity. Thus, it is critical that managers overseeing such reconfiguration efforts ensure that integration of distinct intra-firm resources is synergistic, as well as that the eventual infrastructure offers stronger and more holistic sales support than any single entity alone.

I then spent probably three months going to all the other functions in the company—the pre-sales leader, the services leader, the alliance’s leader. It [sales enablement]

meant that I was taking whole teams that were theirs and putting them into another organization. I needed to convince them that we needed to build this single organization and that I was going to take any resources that they had had—that they were working on from within their own groups—and any budget that they had, and put it together into a single function that would deliver back a better service than they could provide themselves. [Dean / 12 – Vice President, GTM Strategy and Operations]

Given the extent of the work involved, the sales capital reconfiguration stage can be long and tenuous. Therefore, firms may go through multiple iterations of this effort to achieve the desired re-organization that can better support salespeople, as our informant describes:

We were missing capabilities and we couldn’t build it all at once. We had to prioritize; build one team, then build another team. In one case, communications actually reported up directly to the Head of Sales; that was separate from Global Sales Ops. Eventually we said it made more sense as part of my team. We iterated for a long time. I’d say the first three years were about building out the capabilities. [Trish / 40 – Research Director]

Enablement infrastructure rollout Enablement rollout can happen once sales capital is reconfigured and the new infrastructure is ready. Our informant perspectives suggest that since the enablement infrastructure and its associated processes impact how sales support is developed, channeled, received, and utilized, managers must prepare to inoculate initial reactions that are discouraging. Our fieldwork shows that firms may encounter challenges in the form of “inertia,” “internal confusion,” or “being stuck in the old ways” that can weaken the initiative during rollout. Our analysis further suggests that it is unrealistic to merely operationalize the infrastructure and expect the sales organization to start using it. Rather, managers must encourage the coordination (teamwork), commitment (effort), and competencies (newly learned) requisite for a firm-wide embrace of this change (c.f., Change Management; Table 1), and instead roll out the enablement infrastructure in a phased manner.

The phases of enablement infrastructure rollout include infrastructure introduction and infrastructure buy-in. Infrastructure introduction represents enablement leaders activating the sales support infrastructure within the firm and allowing the sales organization to use it. During this phase, sales rank and file can try the infrastructure and provide feedback about its shortfalls. The informant in the quote below

suggests that feedback during this stage depends upon the user.

When you're rolling it [sales enablement] out to the sales teams, there's always a little bit of bumps getting people on board. Are things going to work exactly as you planned? You start to find people that pick up on things fast and are good at what they need to be good at; and then other folks who struggle. *[Andrew / 1 – Vice President, Sales Engineering]*

Reinforcement and sustenance during this stage are critical to enablement initiatives receiving broad-based firm buy-in—i.e., embracement across stakeholder groups and levels (e.g., frontline sales personnel, sales managers, divisional leadership). Industry sentiment captured in our ethnographic efforts further highlights the importance of “firm-wide ownership,” while our interview informants emphasized this idea using terms such as “institutionalization” and “sales enablement becoming a part of company’s DNA.” Our interview quote below highlights the need for sales management’s ownership of the initiative in order to sustain salespeople’s utilization of the enablement infrastructure in their day-to-day work after the initial excitement has passed.

The thing that a lot of people miss about sales enablement is the ongoing reinforcement. You have everyone at a big event—like a sales kickoff or whatever—and you roll out this program. They all go through it and you get a little bit of a bump in the week or two after sales kickoff. Then it dies on the vine because no one’s out there doing the sustaining and reinforcing it. If the first line manager never refers to that thing again or never asks a question about it, it’s as good as dead. *[Damon / 11 – Director, Sales Enablement]*

Second, cross-functional and multi-level support drives ongoing involvement with and contributions to the sales enablement initiative, thus are critical to its long-term utility. In the quote below, an informant highlights how broad buy-in of this initiative depends on enablement leaders co-opting “change agents” in other departments who want to move the organization forward and may quell resistance to the initiative in their respective departments.

There is a lot of resistance to change and we really have to work with people that are internal change agents beyond their title. Those who have the courage and the desire and the cross functional skill to really move an organization forward with a more modern go-to-market approach, such as sales enablement. *[Robin / 35 – Senior Director, Sales]*

Enablement performance evaluation Since developing a sales capability and operationalizing the enablement infrastructure is a resource intensive activity, firms appraise whether such investments provide returns. Thus, performance evaluation constitutes the fourth stage in the sales enablement process. Numerous sales enablement chapter meeting participants highlighted the importance of tracking and proactively subjecting new capabilities to objective measures once they are rolled out. While some discussed how instituting sales enablement as “a best practice” allowed them to have “KPIs to assess a sales process that did not exist before,” others talked about “interim KPIs” or “lagging KPIs” when discussing evaluation indicators. Firms vary in how they evaluate the enablement initiative, but common themes indicate that firms largely focus on process-based (i.e., efficiency) and outcome-based (i.e., effectiveness) appraisals. The quote below highlights the multi-faceted nature of evaluating both parameters:

Sales productivity has two elements—efficiency and effectiveness. Productivity is about making salespeople more efficient through the right tools, processes, and automation. Then you have effectiveness, which is all about whether your salesperson is calling on the right buyer with the right message with the right set of best practices. Then you have a real opportunity to impact sales productivity because you have both parts of the equation. *[Dean / 12 – Vice President, GTM Strategy and Operations]*

Process-based evaluations focus on how much the enablement infrastructure improves sales support processes and/or whether the improved processes are delivering the intended value. For example, the quote below highlights multiple process-based metrics:

One is ramp time—how fast we are onboarding, training, and giving salespeople the skills they need to contribute as quickly as possible. We are working to reduce ramp time by 20% this year. Another key metric for us is customer conversion rate. Conversions from qualifications to the demo stage, and then from negotiation to actual closing. We are working to reduce the time to close deals. *[Sloan / 38 – Head, Sales Enablement]*

Documenting the nature of sales support processes and their efficacy is crucial since such improvements can have positive downstream results (i.e., effectiveness), which are the focus of output-based evaluations. In this regard, informants emphasize the importance of converting inputs into outputs such as sales productivity.

That's why I look at output. I look at the KPIs and see where we're off on KPIs. Then, we go down to a rep level and see what we need to do to make that better. It is all about whether we are getting the output we needed. [Thomas / 39 – *Global Head, Inside Sales*]

Enablement calibration We characterize enablement calibration as an intra-firm effort to fine-tune the enablement process based on the performance measures discussed above. Our analysis indicates that calibration provides an ongoing feedback loop in the enablement process since it pinpoints which parts are and are not helping, as well as institutes targeted changes in how to support salespeople going forward. In the following quote, the informant emphasizes that teams leading enablement endeavors must “come back and ask” important questions about the effectiveness and utility of their work to guide future enablement efforts.

Last fall we did an effectiveness study. We asked ourselves, “did the enablement initiative work?” We dug deep and brought in a third party to do interviews with salespeople. We did analysis of the feedback from our selling teams in different geographies. The feedback was on both the process and the content of what we delivered. We did that because what we want to instill in my team is that if we don't come back and ask ourselves “was it effective,” then we have not done our job. We must know what drove the deal or what closed the deal. [Cara / 9 – *Director, Learning and Development*]

We learn that firms use various data-points to sequentially assess whether activities that underlie their current sales support diagnostic, sales capital reconfiguration, and/or enablement infrastructure stages require fine-tuning. During our fieldwork, we learned that such fine-tuning manifests in a plethora of firm activities: (a) devising measures to discover and address salespeople skill gaps; (b) modifying protocols to improve coordination among marketing, operations, and IT functions; (c) amending sales training standards, delivery, and records; and (d) devising communication strategies aimed at frontline managers to make sales enablement central to everyday work. Calibration activities ensure that enablement efforts are constantly updated and consistent with emergent market and customer needs. In the quote below, an informant discusses how measurement of her firm's sales enablement efforts informs her own focus.

Measurement [of sales enablement activities] helps me to prioritize better. I know how to spend my 365 days this year and I know where to place our team's resources—which to me is super important. With measurement, we can put the right resources in the right

places to better help the field force. [Sloan / 38 – *Head, Sales Enablement*]

Our analysis indicates that since outcome measures used for performance evaluation determine what fine-tuning is needed, they must remain objective. In the quote below, an informant laments that the assessment of the sales enablement initiative in her firm is rooted in leaderships' perceptions (rather than facts and figures) and crafts an argument for objective measurements as the best driver of calibration efforts.

A lot of assessment is more emotional than that. If they hear from constituents—whether it's partners or sales managers or individual sellers—that a program that we delivered was awesome, then we're awesome. But the flip can happen, too. If it's viewed as a waste of time, then we haven't performed. [Camille / 8 – *Senior Director, Sales Enablement*]

Discussion

Theoretical implications

The digital era has transformed marketing and sales practices for several reasons, including greater information availability and the increased velocity of transactions (Kumar et al. 2016). Furthermore, a diverse and complex collection of customer stakeholders are evaluating suppliers. In response, multiple firm functions are required to collaborate holistically and enable frontline personnel to deliver superior value throughout customer ecosystems (Hartmann et al. 2018). However, while the practice of sales enablement has taken root, academic understanding of this phenomenon has lagged. Rangarajan et al.'s (2020) commentary provides scholars with a depiction of the broad scope of sales enablement and its impact on internal and external stakeholders—both of which provide the outline for their future research agenda—yet empirical investigation of this phenomenon is lacking. With this backdrop, we employ an ethnographic inquiry to conceptualize the building blocks of the sales enablement phenomenon and explore how firms enable their sales force and selling systems. In this section, we explicate how our empirical investigation advances the current body of knowledge.

Enabled sales process as an integrative thesis Our conceptualization of sales enablement (i.e., what) as a dynamic capability brings forward a previously absent bridging mechanism that binds disparate organizational processes (e.g., organizational learning, change management, technology adoption, CRM) to improve sales outputs (see Table 1, Fig. 1). In articulating the nature of our integrative framework—along with

its process model—we advance knowledge on three key fronts. First, organizational learning literature suggests that knowledge is embedded in a variety of repositories (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011) and that organizations learn by leveraging accumulated stakeholder knowledge (Bell et al. 2010) across inner environments (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2007). Building from such research, as well as literature focused on competitive market intelligence (Ahearne et al. 2013; Mariadoss et al. 2014; Rapp et al. 2015), our findings show that sales enablement helps institutionalize an environment conducive to learning (i.e., insight triangulation). Further, we show the infrastructure- and process-based support necessary for accumulation, integration, and diffusion of knowledge from (any) employee to the firm and back (i.e., enablement infrastructure). Thus, sales enablement serves as a conducive crucible within firms that allows them to utilize the knowledge they acquire through learning to affect changes to functional work routines (e.g., sales support processes). Sales enablement also produces shared identification of market realities within firms to drive change—i.e., a bridging mechanism that allows organizations to enact knowledge-driven, targeted change.

Second, scholars posit that change management consists of communicating, accepting, and institutionalizing new states. However, despite its potential gains—e.g., increased operational efficiency and effectiveness (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999)—a significant amount of change management practices fail (Raineri 2011). With this backdrop, our explication of the need to secure sales enablement buy-in across firm levels and functions underscores that leaders must work diligently to institutionalize sales enablement with various organizational actors. Further, the feedback loop embedded within our process model (i.e., enablement calibration) emphasizes the criticality of the recursive link between firm-wide changes and the ongoing measurement of downstream outcomes to sustain change. Thus, the process of calibration serves as a critical link that allows the firm to embrace sales enablement as an ongoing and a scalable activity that embodies continuous and holistic change. The notion of ongoing calibration also helps bridge insights from change management and technology adoption literatures—i.e., technology adoption yields performance payoffs when enabling conditions offer guidance regarding the structural-, behavioral-, and process-related changes needed. Such performance payoffs in turn help mitigate technology adoption roadblocks by aligning processes with firm strategy.

Third, existing research shows that CRM integrates myriad organizational activities and helps sellers manage customer journeys via segmentation and resource allocation insights (Arnett and Badrinarayanan 2005). However, a closer look at today's complex sales processes reveals that as sellers focus on monitoring and managing customer journeys, firms must optimally enable sellers through their own journeys (i.e., seller

journeys). This journey begins when a salesperson is hired and extends through the process of one becoming a productive member of the sales organization. Supporting seller journeys also requires firms to possess enablement capabilities that allow for seamless integration of various technology platforms that go above and beyond CRM, with numerous sales-support processes (e.g., onboarding, training and development, customer prospecting, content management) ensuring that salespeople can effectively manage a range of strategic (e.g., lead generation) and tactical (e.g., periodic customer contact) tasks. As an overarching capability, sales enablement compels firms to expand their horizons beyond customer management and the measurement of legacy processes. Rather, enablement philosophy focuses on a range of intra-firm constituents so that they can use their collective learning to develop organizational routines that drive the sales force to better engage their customers.

Viewed collectively, our findings show that sales enablement acts as an integrative capability that bridges piecemeal investments made toward the (a) learning that occurs from increased knowledge (i.e., organizational learning), (b) behavioral modifications needed to match organizational strategy (i.e., change management), and (c) adoption of technology that supports the infrastructure and revenue generating activities (i.e., technology adoption, CRM). Sales enablement extends each of these theoretical domains and allows the firm to strategically align the distributed components of a comprehensive sales process into an integrative framework that boosts sales force efficiency and effectiveness.

Operationalizing the dynamic capability Another theoretical contribution of this study is that we explicate the process through which firms may build a dedicated sales capability (i.e., how). Firm capabilities are situated within complex patterns of coordinated skills and knowledge sources that reside across the organization, and it is when firms possess dynamic capabilities that they are able to combine dispersed resources in a strategic manner to solve their emergent problems (Grant 1996; Kale and Singh 2007). With this backdrop, we highlight how sales enablement facilitates the combination and transformation of firm resources into coordinated support for sales personnel who are dealing with evolving customers and market environments (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). As a dynamic capability, sales enablement brings many knowledge-based processes together and extends existing marketing capability conceptualizations.

Specifically, our findings highlight how sales enablement: (a) combines resources across functional interfaces, directs firm-wide inputs toward revenue generation, bridges organizational strategies with frontline implementation processes, and aligns marketing content with strategic communications (c.f., specialized marketing capabilities; Morgan 2012); (b) coalesces capabilities across sales interfaces into readily

available sales resources and organizes sales operations to efficiently drive KPIs (c.f., cross-functional capabilities; Morgan 2012); (c) organizes inputs from across functions to support sales activities, aligns sales activities with organizational strategies, fosters strategy implementation at the front-line, and foments sales onboarding processes that advance efficiency, learning, and performance (c.f., architectural capabilities; Morgan 2012); (d) utilizes insights from customer journey mapping to identify attractive prospects and integrates lower-order sales inputs into higher-order sales routines (c.f., CRM capabilities; Morgan 2012); and (e) orchestrates best practices across the sales function, instills structure and well-documented methodology to efficiently drive sales KPIs, and develops sales management coaching guidelines (c.f., selling capabilities; Morgan 2012).

In highlighting how sales enablement helps firms bring together such capabilities, our conceptualization theoretically extends marketing capability repertoires that only make cursory reference to sales capabilities. Rather, we explicate how firms' daily work routines may be informed by sales enablement and how to operationalize such a capability so to facilitate alignment between sales and other organizational functions (Moorman and Day 2016). Better enabling the sales organization should therein improve sales inputs (e.g., leads, content), processes (e.g., delivering insights during customer meetings), and outputs (e.g., quota attainment, win rate, pipeline conversion, deal velocity, ramp time) (see Smith et al. 2006).

Managerial implications

While organizations invest heavily in making the buyer–seller exchange as efficient and effective as possible, the task of aligning salespeople's in-market efforts with customer journeys is a persistent challenge. While Table 4 serves practitioners by differentiating sales enablement from extant sales services, the managerial benefits of these otherwise individualized approaches have not fully allowed for requisite organization-wide advances. Sales enablement can propel numerous sought-after outcomes—e.g., salesperson efficiencies (e.g., sales content ROI, onboarding time) and improved performance (e.g., close rates, relationship strength)—that indicate it has the potential to solve lingering challenges. With sales enablement emerging as a capability that facilitates exchange, our research explores how firms enable the field force to succeed across an evolving customer buying dynamic. Findings provide managers with a structure and process for developing sales enablement, along with evidence to support sales enablement's effectiveness. These insights are important to myriad managerial functions, as sales enablement helps disband existing silos and foster a cohesive customer-facing strategy. As we discuss implications of our findings across the organizational hierarchy, we simultaneously create examples that span across stages of the process model.

Within the preliminary stage, practical aspects of sales support diagnostics are a necessity of establishing the sales enablement initiative. Typically, a sales enablement leader is responsible for the firm-wide assessment of resources and the distribution of sales support, starting with multiple facets of the sales function (e.g., field force, sales managers, sales executives). To accomplish this task, enablement leaders should meet with inside and outside field force personnel to assess their overall readiness and garner perspective (e.g., walk through good/bad deals, discuss areas of sales process where they feel ill-prepared). For example, observing sales teams in action (e.g., fieldwork with outside reps, listening in on inside reps) in order to yield insights into salesperson behaviors that cannot be gleaned from conversation. Sales enablement leaders should also explore frontline managers' unique challenges and forward-looking perspectives (e.g., product/account opportunities, long-term visions for territory success). Such dialogue allows managers to describe the white space between where they see their teams going and what their salespeople need to get there—e.g., systemic issues that may exist in selling motions. As a result, enablement leaders can design ways to align with sales management and communicate their value to sales' success rather than being perceived as a group that merely creates more assessment. These collective efforts allow the enablement function to initiate the process model based on diagnostics of relevance to sales competencies, knowledge requirements, training and development offerings, pipeline velocities, and technology support tools.

Second, organizations must acquire, combine, retain, and/or eliminate resources and capacities across multiple functions in order for sales enablement to become a nucleus of strategic revenue initiatives and reach beyond prevalent sales structures within the firm (i.e., sales capital reconfiguration). It is therefore crucial that executive leadership (e.g., CEO, CFO, COO) strategically prioritize sales personnel support; only then can firms reconfigure and align varied resources to build an enablement infrastructure. Such stages inherently require silo busting. For example, the Chief Revenue Officer (CRO) may structure sales, marketing, and IT so that they coordinate their efforts to provide a seamless customer experience (e.g., automate redundant sales motions in order to enhance interactions with relevant insights and technology). When mature, the sales enablement role spans functional areas germane to revenue generating activities and fosters realigning resources that have been stuck in legacy configurations. While such processes are fraught with real-world difficulties, sales enablement fosters collaboration and connections between silos. The results of these efforts is a continuous, iterative journey that enhances co-created value. Sales enablement thus reaches beyond CRM and sales stack point solutions to provide a seamless customer experience and an augmented sales force.

Third, functional areas of the firm must also increasingly align resources in order for sales enablement to serve as a

Table 4 Sales enablement and contemporary sales services

Sales services	Sales enablement		Insight triangulation				Enablement infrastructure			Sales support envelopment		
	Dynamic Capability	Insight Triangulation	Enablement Infrastructure	Sales Support Envelopment	Customer Journey Assessment	Sales Process Assessment	Sales Support Assessment	Technical Structure	Sales Conduit	Input Orchestration	Output Appraisal	
	Transform firm resources into realized marketplace value offerings	Amalgamate knowledge to derive insights and align internal processes with external conditions	Develop a centralized hub of coordinated insights and a channel to serve sales	Orchestrate inputs and outputs to improve effectiveness and efficiency	Monitor the nature of customer journeys and their evolution	Align sales processes with current customer needs	Evaluate how firm entities support salespeople and sales process	Facilitate integration among technology platforms and firm processes	Steadfastly channel entities that help the sales force achieve objectives	Synchronize disjointed inputs emanating from multiple intra-firm entities	Extract effects incurred through resource utilization of inputs	
Sales Onboarding	✓					✓	✓					
Sales Training	✓			✓		✓			✓		✓	
CRM			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	
Content Services			✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	
Sales-Marketing Interface	✓					✓	✓			✓		
Sales Process	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Customer Journey		✓			✓	✓						
Sales Enablement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

✓ Indicates overlap between theoretical perspective on the specific sales services and our empirical findings, while blank spaces indicate a lack of such overlap (i.e., what is new about sales enablement that theoretical perspectives on extant sales services do not capture)

dynamic capability. As functional leaders assess returns on enablement investments (i.e. enablement performance evaluation), measures should reflect individual-, team-, and organizational-level processes and outputs. Firms proficient in developing sales enablement capabilities (e.g., overarching alignment of resources) can find strategic advantages more easily than those firms stuck in routine cross-functional alignment (e.g., sales-marketing interfaces). Thus, sales enablement may motivate firms to take a more holistic perspective when thinking about supporting sales personnel and subsequently developing capacities so their sales support apparatus encompasses multiple intra-firm touchpoints and is evolutionary in nature. Such an iterative process suggests that sales enablement seldom has an ending point or goal attainment. Rather, it is in a constant state of evolution and requires managerial corrections to modernize around the customer journey design point. Such iterative processes and support systems may lead to a culture of developing long-term professional growth. In such cases, the focal feedback point of human capital development should identify where touch points and interaction are essential to the growth of skills, resources, and actions needed to create value for the customer and the firm.

Our study shows that sales enablement is more than a function; it is a dynamic capability that involves all resources that serve customer-facing stakeholders. Organizations should invest in this agile and supportive apparatus to aid stakeholders trying to respond to fluctuating marketplace demands and evolving customer journeys. These volatile factors can push and pull supplier solutions in varying directions; however, corporations that embrace sales enablement will be able to learn via an iterative process that reflects sales' and customers' dynamism. When these elements of the firm and sales enablement coalesce, firms that possess this overarching capability should have a competitive advantage stemming from their culture of data-driven, iterative process improvement. Employees, firm leaders, and customers will all come to expect that the organizational structure will adapt to new efficiencies and new customer demands. In short, sales enablement provides a capability to adjust to ever-evolving markets, create greater value, and attract stakeholders across the organization to serve customer-centric precepts.

Limitations and future research

This research utilizes an ethnographic inquiry, comprising various data sources, including depth-interviews with a large and varied sample of sales enablement professionals. This group of informants likely captures the core components of sales enablement and the steps necessary to begin the sales enablement process (see Creswell 2007; Griffin and Hauser 1993; McQuarrie 2014). Nevertheless, we do not claim to offer an exhaustive list of perspectives and, per the limitations

of interpretive analysis, our findings are not generalizable to all sales enablement operations. Further, qualitative techniques rely on the researchers' interpretations and therefore lack opportunities for direct replication (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Rather, our qualitative research results provide a starting point for scholars to better understand effective sales enablement. Future scholarship can therefore test our emergent conceptualization as well as improve the generalizability and refutability of our process model.

As one means of improving generalizability, future scholarship should assess the contextual nature of our process model in order to bring new thought to this space. For example, as the sales enablement process moves from the initial stages of sales support diagnostic to sales capital reconfiguration, what intra-firm factors moderate the efficacy of this pathway? While not detailed in our findings and additional support is needed to verify their impact, our data preliminarily suggest that organizational leaders who support the sales force are critical to mobilizing firm-wide sales capital. By comparison, organizational silos and/or political undercurrents create obstacles to reconfiguring sales capital—e.g., impede cross-functional information dispersion and the reconfiguration of respective resources, as well as drive each function to devise its own work processes and sales support mechanisms. Thus, while roadblocks to this specified pathway are known to exist (e.g., uncertainty of the benefits, time and effort needed to reconfigure resources, unwillingness of various functions to share control over supporting processes), future research should explore contextual factors that accentuate (e.g., leadership impetus) and/or attenuate (e.g., organizational silos) our emergent pathways.

Next, while our study's perspectives are essential to understanding sales enablement and its requisite developmental processes, they can also be characterized as single informants. By comparison, multi-level (e.g., senior, middle, frontline) and/or multi-source (e.g., salesperson, customer) perspectives may expand future sales research efforts (see Johnson et al. 2014). For example, the interfacing dynamics elicited by sales enablement lend themselves to multi-level research efforts. Extant research notes that individual salespeople nested within sales teams often carry both individual and team goals that are not simply an aggregation of individual goals (i.e., multi-group, multi-level; Evans et al. 2012; Jones et al. 2005). Future sales enablement research should explore the competing demands across levels that may generate tension for salespeople now enabled to achieve individual- and team-level goals. Furthermore, our study only captures insights from the perspective of sales enablement professionals. Future research should pair either intra-firm (e.g., sales enablement personnel—salespeople) or inter-firm (e.g., enabled salespeople—customers) dyadic perspectives to assess sales enablement further.

Future research might also focus on the trajectories of sales enablement and investigate the dynamic nature of the concept. For example, our analysis establishes a sequential process model that firms can use to initiate sales enablement. Since sales enablement is dynamic, future scholarship should look at data across multiple time periods to test maturity models and the causal nature of our implementation stages. Further, given sales enablement's projected impact on performance, future research may seek to assess the relative costs and returns of the practices. When assessing returns, scholars should explicate a mixture of objective short-term (e.g., sales process ROI) and long-term (e.g., corporate financial performance) sales outcomes to understand the tension between transactional-focused and relational-focused enablement goals. As is the case when customer demands are at odds with organizational directives to design an empowered sales process (see Perry et al. 1999), sales enablement may need to negotiate competing agendas depending on the intended design. Additionally, future research may also differentiate between performance implications occurring at the organizational level (e.g., firm performance) and frontline level (e.g., salesperson performance) to supplement messaging around acceptance and value to frontline salespeople. Regardless of the type of outcomes assessed, it is critical for scholars to extend our conceptualization of what sales enablement is by developing insights that specify how it works to drive performance across time and situation.

Finally, beyond direct revenue implications, researchers should assess sales enablement's influence on salespeople or customer behaviors and attitudes. Thus, future scholarship should assess additional outcome variables that depict subjective responses to sales enablement efforts. While sales enablement aims to benefit salespeople, it may also generate problems. For example, as expectations increase, salespeople may produce myriad attitudinal responses to internal sales enablement efforts (e.g., job dissatisfaction, role overload, stress). Thus, future research could explore the double-bottom-line implications of sales enablement—i.e., revenue-focused and employee-focused implications. Such efforts may be an entry point into research that examines a dark side to sales enablement. Extant sales literature includes many examples of customer exploitation when the power of information asymmetry shifts in the salesperson's favor, which is certainly plausible within the scope of sales enablement.

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