

## Innovation Mentality: Three Perspectives of the Selling Function

By Christoph Englert and Claus-Christian Carbon

Innovative new products are crucial for a firm's sustainable development and economic success. At the forefront of innovation commercialization, the salesforce plays a pivotal role in business-to-business (B2B) environments. Existing studies show that many determinants influence the launch of a new product. We were specifically interested in the necessary attributes of salespeople during innovation commercialization. We created the term "Innovation Mentality" (IM) as a basis for our empirical study. In each participating company, we recruited three people with three different job profiles within the sales department: Sales managers (disciplinary responsibility), internal salespeople (operative responsibility), and direct sales representatives (customer responsibility). Firms can take the concrete set of attributes to search more specifically for experts while designing their salesforce for innovation commercialization or to challenge their individual sales training programs. We further indicate that all parts of the salesforce need IM – direct salesforce with customer contact and indirect selling functions with more internal touchpoints.

### INTRODUCTION

The most important mission of a firm is to continuously develop further and launch innovative new products to ensure revenues and long-term profitability (Ahearne et al. 2010; Ružić and Benazić 2021). This innovation process is often associated explicitly with the initial development of an innovation. Consequently, the commercialization of the innovations, as the second phase of the process, is usually not addressed (Fuertes-Callén and Cuéllar-Fernández 2014). This commercialization phase poses enormous challenges for many firms but is, at the same time, a major success factor for their business activities (Fu et al. 2010; Hohenberg, Sebastian and Christian Homburg 2019; Homburg, Hohenberg, and Hahn 2018; McAmis and Forbes 2017; Sharma and Sagar 2018; van den Berg et al. 2014). Despite superior product benefits and demanding markets, many innovative new products perform weakly and do not sell themselves (Zablah et al. 2012). The salesforce is pivotal in this respect, especially in B2B environments (Endres et al. 2022). It is mainly up to the salesforce to convince their customers of the new product's value to bring revenue

into their own organization. The more demanding customers get, the more the salesforce must increase its innovation activity (Evans et al. 2012).

Many B2B companies use their established sales teams to market new products. This approach bears risks, as the portfolios are often complex, and proven products compete with innovative new products (Chiesa and Frattini 2011; van der Borgh and Schepers 2017). "Some firms take sales force commitment to any new product as given, seemingly adopting the attitude *If we build it, they will sell*. However, management cannot guarantee salespeople's commitment to a new product. For various reasons, salespeople may fail to sell a new product [...]" (Atuahene-Gima 1997, p. 498).

While previous studies confirm that the own salesforce is a key factor in new product commercialization success, there is still uncertainty about which mentality salespeople must have to commercialize innovative new products. Often, research studies concentrate on new product launches as a whole and thus include other parts of the value chain like pricing or marketing. In other cases, studies focus on salesforce management determinants of products in general, independently of the product's lifecycle (Fraenkel, Haftor, and Pashkevich 2016). The motivation of the salesforce through appropriate steering instruments or creative selling through more innovation orientation in the sales department are further important research streams. Both help to improve a new product's selling performance but do not break down the necessary

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attributes of the individual salespeople (Hohenberg and Homburg 2016; Locander, Weinberg, and Locander 2018). Besides this fragmented initial situation, to our knowledge, none of the previous studies determined the different perspectives associated with the respective functions inside the salesforce. Most commonly, sales representatives or managers are considered in earlier studies if the role of the salesforce is under investigation. We will enlarge this with our so-called *triad-perspective approach*.

### Our research contribution

Our primary aim is to identify a certain IM that is favorable for assisting the salesforce in selling innovation assets. IM is addressed sparsely in the current research literature (Berdecia-Cruz, Flecha, and Ortiz 2022). According to our understanding, there is not yet a correlation to the salesforce. Further, we aim to indicate which job profiles in sales need this kind of mentality and why.

Hence, we examine the following research questions to structure the present study and its results:

*RQ1: Which attributes describe Innovation Mentality in diverse selling functions?*

*RQ2: Which selling functions exert the greatest influence on innovation commercialization and need Innovation Mentality?*

We grouped our participants by their job profiles and, so inherently also by their functions (sales managers, internal salespeople, direct sales representatives). We call this the *triad-perspective approach*. It is based on the principle of lateral perspective swaps, where intentionally, employees of different functions temporarily swap perspectives by changing their roles for a few days. The idea behind this is that there is mostly more than one way to view and evaluate a situation. This helps to build cognitive flexibility (Hinds 2023). Although we did not switch roles, the core principle is similar to our *triad-perspective approach*. Thus it helps to get insights from three main perspectives in sales and gain a new or deeper understanding of a situation. Our results and the triadic concept offer important contributions to the literature on new product commercialization and the associated role of the

salesforce. We offer critical managerial implications for several target groups. First, for sales managers, when designing their salesforce for innovative products. Our results can help to have the right people in the right positions in the selling function. Second, for Human Resources (HR) Management, when selecting the most suitable candidates, reconsider future job advertisements and new product sales training design. Lastly, for future salespeople or students of various disciplines like Marketing, Business Administration, or Sales, who can take our findings to challenge and reflect their mentality. Importantly, this might discover innovation-selling as a potential field of future profession.

### RELATED LITERATURE

#### Important definitions

We will make two essential definitions for our study. We will define innovation commercialization as bringing new and innovative products to the market. This aligns with the definition of Fuertes-Callén and Cuéllar-Fernández (2014); thus, we will cover all activities in which the salesforce is involved.

Second, it is necessary here to clarify what is meant by the term mentality and how it differentiates from the term mindset. Non-scientific approaches differ between one's established attitudes and beliefs as a mindset and the broader term of mentality as the overall mental state of an individual (Domaradzki 2023). There is little scientific research on the differentiation of both terms. Most researchers concentrate either on one or see both terms as synonyms (Dweck 2017; Lothary 2023). Mentalities are like a multi-piece Swiss Army knife, enabling individuals to adapt their mindsets to tangible situated demands. Thus, mentalities refer to a thinking style, while mindsets refer to a thinking habit (Sammur 2019). Following this differentiation by Sammur, the current study will question the thinking style and not only the included thinking habits when facing innovative new products. Thus, we want a broad picture of the attributes needed for IM.

In the following, we consider two research streams to approach the context of the present study. First, we want to identify known salesforce's attributes influencing new product performance. The second research stream relating to the present context is

innovation adoption by the salesforce. Corresponding variables to stimulate or hinder the adoption are examined from the relevant literature.

Both research streams have not yet been conceptualized as IM but help to understand the current state of research about salespeople's attributes while confronted with innovative new products.

### **Attributes influencing new product performance**

Salespeople's selling intentions are a predictor of later new product performance. Managers should focus on increasing sales representative's self-efficacy and a positive attitude toward selling the new product. Both build selling intentions (Fu et al. 2010).

The most vital motivational driver for a sales representative's new product performance is the internalized new product selling motivation. People with solid learning abilities and high-performing capabilities, in particular, have greater internalized new product-selling motivation and are candidates for innovation commercialization (Homburg, Hohenberg, and Hahn 2018).

Fu (2009) concentrated on the variables experience, age, and goal setting concerning their impact on new product selling performance. Younger salespeople sell new products earlier than older salespeople and perform around five times more effectively than salespeople who are twenty years older. The factor of age diminishes over time. Whereas age and experience are positively correlated, experienced salespeople (long in their job) achieve good results early and consistently, and the experience factor accelerates over time (Fu 2009).

Experienced salespeople are essential but challenging characters when it comes to new product selling. Very experienced salespeople do not gain greater performance through increased effort. Managers need to find other ways, like incentives or conditions, that empower experienced salespeople to work smarter but not harder (Atuahene-Gima and Micheal 1998).

In addition to experience and the attitude towards the potential of the new product, Atuahene-Gima and Micheal described lower customer role ambiguity, more outstanding education, and higher perceptions of the

self-advantages of selling new products compared to existing products as success variables (Atuahene-Gima and Micheal 1998). Ahearne et al. (2010) concluded very similarly. They described the extent to which the salesforce believes in the value and usefulness of the new product as a critical factor, as this impacts the effort they spend on it. Another variable influencing the effort expended by salespeople is their perception of the product's superiority against competitor products (Ahearne et al. 2010). Important personality traits when hiring salespeople are optimism and goal orientation. Healthy optimism leads to cooperative behavior, long-term orientation, and resilience. A higher level of optimism will create a more positive context towards new product introductions (Hohenberg, Sebastian and Christian Homburg 2019; McAmis and Forbes 2017). During the hiring process, sales managers can already shape the social context of their future salesforce toward new product selling. This can be accomplished via personality tests, biodata, and cognitive ability tests (McAmis and Forbes 2017).

Creativity and implementation are two distinct steps in the context of salesforce innovation and need to be distinguished. While the salesforce has no formal responsibility for innovation, it must demonstrate creativity and implement innovative processes, too. In an innovative organizational culture, creative ideas will be more likely implemented. This will indirectly have a positive impact on sales performance (Wang and Miao 2015).

The supervisor-sales rep fit is described as a driver for successful innovation-commercialization. Salespeople who report to a compatible supervisor can achieve up to 30% more sales than average; the difference can be more than 100% when comparing a beneficial pairing with a non-beneficial pairing. Matching dyads can enhance innovation success further with innovation-oriented variable compensation (Hohenberg, Sebastian and Christian Homburg 2019).

A further attribute is supervisee trust. It is influenced by the sales control and the supervisor's behavior. Supervisor accessibility, achievement orientation, and role ambiguity are the main drivers. Sales managers should differentiate between low- and high-trust societies when supervising. This is very

much dependent on the cultural context. When trust is built, it is also important to differentiate between both expressions when innovation selling performance should be increased. Factors that will work in high-trust contexts might not work in low-trust contexts and vice versa (Atuahene-Gima and Li 2002).

#### Attributes influencing innovation adoption

The research context of innovation adoption by the salesforce goes back to the work of Anderson

and Robertson (1995) and Atuahene-Gima (1997). Greater new product adoption leads to increased sales performance and customer and salesforce satisfaction (Atuahene-Gima 1997; Hultink and Atuahene-Gima 2000). The variables influencing the innovation adoption by the salesforce are summarized from the existing literature and captured in Table 1 (Anderson and Robertson 1995; Atuahene-Gima 1997; McAmis and Forbes 2017; Wieseke, Homburg, and Lee 2007):

**Table 1:** Innovation adoption by the salesforce

Variables	stimulates innovation adoption	inhibits innovation adoption
influence of managers on brand adoption	+	
behavior-based sales control	+	
outcome-based sales control		-
greater experience	+	-
intuitive problem-solving style	+	
higher failure tolerance in the organization	+	
higher commitment to the firm	+	
systematic problem-solving style		-
greater career success	+	
dependency on the firm	+	
greater customer and boss role ambiguity		-
functional conflicts	+	
training incl. modeling experience		-
perception of customer loyalty hazard		-
level of training	+	
high-performance orientation		-
number of new products		-
high learning orientation	+	
fast R&D times		-
greater novelty of products		-

Depending on how salespeople solve problems, either intuitively or systematically, it can have a positive or negative effect on adopting a new product. Regarding the variable experience of the salesperson, different opinions prevail. While Atuahene-Gima clustered well-experienced into greater adoption, Anderson and Robertson see more experienced as less likely to adopt. This is highly likely based on the methodology of their studies.

The basic knowledge about adoption was extended through McAmis and Forbes (2017). Their comprehensive study concluded that training with inclusive feedback, shared experience, and modeling will increase the selling function's

adoption (McAmis and Forbes 2017). A strong brand adoption from the sales manager positively influences the brand adoption of his or her salespeople, even if their expected customer demand is low (Wieseke, Homburg, and Lee 2007).

The research body on salespeople's innovation adoption was essentially extended by Endres et al. (2022). They investigated the relationship between the salespeople's adoption of an innovation and the corresponding customer's perception. Salespeople's perception of their innovation adoption has only a moderate influence on the customer's perception. Salespeople's effort, in contrast, is strongly correlated with customers' perceptions. Further, salespeople who are satisfied with their direct payment, seem to convey lower commitment and effort to the customers. One reason might be that salespeople who are already satisfied might, in turn, appear less motivated to sell new and effort-associated products (Endres et al. 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

We employed a qualitative study with a sample of 45 sales experts from 15 different companies for our in-depth interviews. This aligns with the recommendation for a minimum sample size of 25-30 participants to reach saturation and redundancy (Dworkin 2012). A peculiarity of our investigation is the triadic approach in our data. In each of the involved 15 companies, we consistently conducted the same three sales functions: Sales manager (sales executives with at least three direct reports), internal salespeople (salespeople in the back office without direct customer contacts), and direct sales representative (salespeople with direct customer contact and revenue responsibility). This approach allows us to compare our results by function better and get insights on our research stream from different perspectives in sales.

We made initial contact with the participants by e-mail or by phone. To ensure the *triad-perspective approach*, we identified one main contact person per company who supported finding the right participants for the three functions. We explained our research initially by phone to our main contact and received, in 15 out of 23 cases, the respective contacts of our later participants. This

yields a very high response rate of 65% of participating companies compared to typical studies in this field with quantitative and multi-firm approaches, for instance, 18.3% (Johnson and Sohi 2017), 35.4% (Chen, Peng, and Hung 2015) or 39% (Locander, Weinberg, and Locander 2018). We received only two participants for potential interviews in six of the remaining eight companies. We did not consider them for the interview phase as exact compliance with the triad-perspective approach was a high priority for us.

All participating companies are responsible for the GSA market (Germany, Switzerland, Austria), and all but one (located in the Netherlands but serving the GSA market) are also headquartered there. Thus, they all execute their value proposition in a very high-priced market environment. Innovating permanently plays a vital role in the success of companies under such conditions.

All companies can be allocated to the B2B sector; the industries are diverse: Intralogistics (33%), Engineering (13%), Chemicals (13%), Automotive (13%), Fastening and Assembly Material (7%), Logistics (7%), Electronics (7%) and System Supplier (7%). The size of the companies ranges from small companies with 32 employees to true global players with more than 80,000 employees. Our participants were, on average, 5.7 years in their current sales function and had an average experience in sales of 17 years. Thus, we had access to more than 750 years of sales experience in our study. Around 80% of our interview partners were male, and the rest indicated that they were female. The average age of our participants was 44.1 years.

### Research method and data collection

Our research approach follows the moderate constructivist perspective (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). This approach helps recognize and capture the subjective experiences and perceptions of individual actors across various levels of the same sales organization (Micallef, Keränen, and Kokshagina 2024). The research questions have been derived from the existing literature. As outlined in the initial context, while several studies delve into the commercialization of innovations from a sales standpoint, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning sales professionals' mentality and individual attributes to



commercialize innovative new products successfully. To formulate an opinion relevant to each respective selling function, participants were instructed to respond to the questions consistently from the perspective of their current function.

We collected the qualitative data employing in-depth interviews with all participants. The semi-structured interviews were universally conceptualized with the same set of standardized questions for each respondent. The interviews were conducted in German, and only one participant preferred English. Personal data and information on the company were obtained at the beginning of each interview. After that, we had a list of four main topics, including open questions. To guarantee a high level of standard quality, we prepared an interview guide that has been set up with two academic experts. In addition, we piloted our interviews with three sales experts representing all three functions of our triad. After piloting, we sharpened the structure and sequence of the interview guide once again and started the interview phase. All participants received pre-information on our main topics as well as relevant information on data protection. The interview guidelines and questions have not been shared upfront to maximize the chances of receiving spontaneous and unprepared answers. We executed all 45 interviews between March and August 2023 and used Microsoft Teams for recording and automated transcription. The interview took 45.3 minutes on average, and the absolute duration ranged between 27 and 72 minutes. The interview time for the present study accounts for around 20% of the total time. With the automated transcript as the basis, we re-worked all transcripts one by one together with the audio and video recordings of the interviews. This procedure was done with MAXQDA (version 22.8.0), which further served as software for our data and text analysis. We utilized the qualitative content analysis methodology as described by Mayring (Mayring 2000). We set up a coding guide and a category system for the text analysis. We created a list of coded segments which we then took for individual analysis by research topic. While the text analysis was still done in German, the data evaluation was done in English to prepare this article. To ensure high-quality translation, the initial translation was first conducted by a subject expert, and subsequently, an experienced academic reviewed the translations. Finally,

the results were checked and corrected by a professional translator and native speaker.

## RESULTS

Commercializing innovations successfully is a complex task in the B2B environment, especially for the salesforce. Success depends on more than just the direct sales representative. Many variables influence the final customer order, and every function in the sales department has its share. Our participating companies are executing their value proposition in the GSA region. This market environment is costly, and firms must innovate to differentiate from the competition. Our selected companies all confirmed that ongoing innovation is a key success factor for their business. This initial assumption was confirmed by the first set of questions in our interviews. As one interviewee put it: *“We attach significant importance to innovation, as we see ourselves as the innovation leader in our industry. We also need innovations as we claim to be the price leader. This means that we are always more expensive than the competition and to enforce a higher price on the market, we also need innovations to set us apart from the competition.”* Another commented: *“You are either the technology leader or the price leader. We clearly see ourselves as a technology leader here, because being ‘stuck in the middle’ is always dangerous. That is why innovation is very important to us. This also justifies the fact that we are allowed and able to produce in Austria.”*

### Results of Research Question 1

If we now turn to our main research stream, IM, the analysis reveals a rich set of attributes. We asked the respondents the following open question: *Keyword ‘Innovation Mentality in sales’: When you hear that, what is the attitude of such a person? What makes them special? What attributes does such a person have?* The response rate on this question was 100%. We received a total of 257 descriptive mentions, which means, on average, 5.5 individual mentions per participant. As the respondents verbally described their answers, some repeated them by rephrasing them. We took all of them into account for the initial coding to get a comprehensive picture of the results. We then classified all mentions into corresponding attributes. Table 2 provides an overview of the main results:

Table 2 - Summary of main attributes of IM in three different selling functions

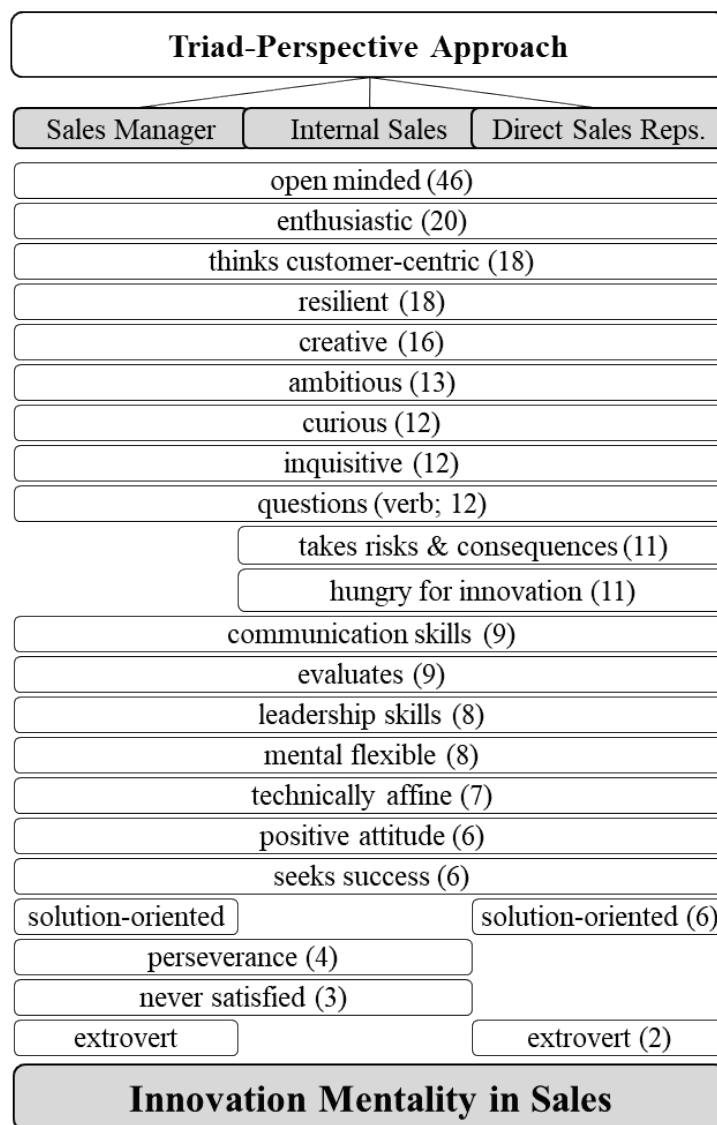
	Sales Manager	Internal Sales	Sales Representatives	Similarities
<b>Company 1</b>	leadership skills; open-minded; technically affine; solution-oriented; thinks customer-centric	hungry for innovation; open-minded	positive attitude; curious; inquisitive; thinks customer-centric	
<b>Company 2</b>	open-minded; communication skills	curious; takes risks and consequences; resilient; enthusiastic	thinks customer-centric; curious; resilient	
<b>Company 3</b>	curious; open-minded; questions (verb); thinks customer-centric; evaluates	creative; thinks customer-centric; perseverance; resilient	enthusiastic; extrovert	
<b>Company 4</b>	creative; thinks customer-centric; perseverance; extrovert	never satisfied; hungry for innovation, curious; resilient; ambitious	open-minded; inquisitive; creative; mental flexible; takes risks and consequences; resilient	
<b>Company 5</b>	creative; technically affine; enthusiastic	open-minded; enthusiastic; takes risks and consequences; resilient	open-minded; communication skills; enthusiastic; positive attitude; resilient; solution-oriented	enthusiastic
<b>Company 6</b>	open-minded; enthusiastic; positive attitude; communication skills	open-minded; inquisitive; enthusiastic; technically affine; thinks customer-centric; resilient	solution-oriented; open-minded; questions (verb); leadership skills; resilient	open-minded
<b>Company 7</b>	enthusiastic; thinks customer-centric; resilient; inquisitive; perseverance; leadership skills	curious; thinks customer-centric; ambitious	open-minded; evaluates; hungry for innovation; enthusiastic; ambitious	
<b>Company 8</b>	curious; questions (verb); open-minded; seeks success	positive attitude; leadership skills; enthusiastic	open-minded; creative	
<b>Company 9</b>	enthusiastic; communication skills; ambitious; resilient	thinks customer-centric; hungry for innovation; evaluates; leadership skills; ambitious	open-minded; creative; curious; enthusiastic; ambitious	ambitious
<b>Company 10</b>	curious; inquisitive; questions (verb); open-minded; mental flexible; communication skills	open-minded; mental flexible; resilient; questions (verb); communication skills	ambitious; open-minded; resilient; mental flexible	open-minded; mentally flexible
<b>Company 11</b>	open-minded, curious; inquisitive; questions (verb); solution-oriented	curious; inquisitive; open-minded	open-minded; solution-oriented; resilient	open-minded
<b>Company 12</b>	enthusiastic; open-minded; seeks success	creative; evaluates	creative; open-minded; solution-oriented; leadership skills	
<b>Company 13</b>	open-minded; enthusiastic; technically affine; communication skills	open-minded; creative; ambitious; hungry for innovation; thinks customer-centric; positive attitude	open-minded; creative; resilient	open-minded
<b>Company 14</b>	seeks success; open-minded; mental flexible; perseverance	open-minded; takes risks and consequences; seeks success; thinks customer-centric; resilient	inquisitive; takes risks and consequences; resilient; mental flexible	
<b>Company 15</b>	ambitious; open-minded; curious; never satisfied; hungry for innovation; resilient	open-minded; evaluates; thinks customer-centric; communication skills	enthusiastic; inquisitive; seeks success; technically affine; ambitious	

Out of the initial 257 mentions, we concluded 22 attributes for IM in the selling function. In six companies, we found attributes named by all three perspectives in the same company; in four cases, it was the attribute “open-minded”.

We will not state that salespeople with all or a certain number of those attributes are automatically excellent in commercializing innovations. Nevertheless, these insights should be taken to reflect and improve the challenge of innovation-selling.

Figure 1 highlights our findings and provides an overview of our attributes, displaying the number of initial mentions of each attribute in brackets and the respective allocation of attributes to the functions mentioning them.

**Figure 1:** Summary of main results



Note: The number of mentions is written in parentheses behind the attribute. The respective frame reassigns the attribute to the function that named it.



**Results of Research Question 2:**

RQ2 examined which selling function has the greatest influence on the commercialization of innovations and benefits of IM.

The respondents were directly asked *to what extent they need this kind of Innovation Mentality in their function to successfully commercialize innovations*. Table 3 illustrates the summary statistics:

**Table 3** - Which functions in sales need an IM

	Overall	Sales Manager	Internal Sales	Sales Representatives
IM necessary in function	37	13	11	13
IM important but not crucial in function	3	2	0	1
IM not relevant in function	5	0	4	1

Most of the interviewed sales managers evaluate IM as crucial in their position during innovation selling. One sales manager put it: *“If I did not have this quality, I might have been in a different job for a long time.”* Two sales managers agreed that it is necessary to have it but not crucial for innovation commercialization performance. Interestingly, in both companies, the respective salespeople (sales representatives and internal sales) stated that they clearly need IM for their function: *“Everyone in our company should have it”* one internal sale put it.

The majority of internal sales respondents see IM as important in their position. This underlines the assumption that the internal sales function plays a vital role in the sales orchestration when it comes to innovation commercialization. This statement is reinforced when looking at the explanations of the interviewees who rated it as not relevant. All four have no direct operative touchpoints with innovation-commercialization and thus do not need IM in their daily business.

Most of the direct salesforce see IM as pivotal for their daily business: *“You need this enthusiasm for new things. I think this initiative- taking familiarization with new product functions or USPs means that you stand out from the market, you get people excited. I think if you don’t stand behind the product yourself, it becomes incredibly difficult to market something.”* One respondent argued that it depends on the degree of innovation. The more radical it gets, the more IM is needed. For incremental improvements, he rated it as not mandatory but helpful. Somewhat unexpected was one direct sales representative who saw IM as not relevant. The explanation is comprehensible: *“This is due to my function. I’m in aftersales, where, unfortunately, I currently have no connection to innovation at all.”*

In a subsequent inquiry, participants were tasked with ranking the respective influence of the three functions on the commercialization of innovations. In this regard, the following sentiment emerged:

**Table 4** - Ranking of selling functions influence on innovation-commercialization

Ranking			Rank (mentions)
1) Sales Representatives	2) Sales Manager	3) Internal Sales	1 (25)
1) Sales Manager	2) Sales Representatives	3) Internal Sales	2 (13)
1) Sales Representatives	2) Internal Sales	3) Sales Manager	3 (11)
1) Internal Sales	2) Sales Representatives	3) Sales Manager	4 (1)
1) Internal Sales	2) Sales Manager	3) Sales Representatives	4 (1)

*Note: In total 51 mentions, as six respondents ranked two functions equally.*

There exists a clear trend indicating that direct sales representatives exert the greatest influence on the commercialization of innovations, being ranked with the highest influence in 36/51 cases and the second highest influence in 14/51 cases. Interacting permanently with customers, IM is crucial for enhancing the commercialization of innovations.

According to our participants, the role of the sales manager primarily involves igniting their team and fostering enthusiasm for innovation. Our respondents rank the influence in 13/51 cases as most important, in 26/51 cases as second most important.

Conversely, the internal selling function often handles administrative tasks but still holds a significantly important role in marketing. Back-office and field sales frequently operate as a tandem over extended periods, relying on mutual trust. If the back office lacks conviction regarding an innovation or encounters issues during execution, it negatively impacts their sales representatives. This may lead to the direct sales teams refraining from offering the innovation, or the internal sales team dissuading customers from adopting the new product during inquiries. Consequently, fostering an IM holds importance across all sales domains, both directly and indirectly.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provides various implications on the research stream of innovation commercialization and the corresponding role of the salesforce, which is valuable for several target groups. Our study participants confirmed that innovations are of high interest if firms claim to be either the price or the technology leader, especially in very competitive market environments. According to the related literature, we can state that innovation commercialization remains a huge challenge, especially for companies in B2B environments. We can further confirm that the salesforce is pivotal in this respect.

Based on our triad-perspective approach, we provide new understandings regarding the importance of the different sales functions and their perspectives on innovation commercialization. We recommend that sales managers consider all perspectives of their sales team when executing innovation commercialization. We

will not question that the frontline sales representatives greatly impact later commercialization success. Instead, we want to strengthen the consequent involvement of the internal perspective. Our results indicate that IM is crucial for the internal team, but in 27% of the cases, the internal team has no touchpoints regarding innovation commercialization.

A major part of our study concentrated on the termination of IM in Sales. Table 2 can help sales managers during their challenge of commercializing innovations in several ways. They know whether their existing salesforce has the necessary mentality when innovative new products need to be sold. They could further take the attributes to hire new experts for their salesforce, dedicated to innovation-selling. Sales managers should also reflect their mentality with the help of the findings. It can serve partially as a guideline for individual development opportunities for all functions in sales, being outlined separately per function. While attributes like curiosity or technical affinity are complex to develop, other attributes like leadership skills, resilience, or customer-centric thinking can be learned. Our study approach of perspective swaps can greatly interest sales managers in their working context. *“Perspective swaps can help detox leaders from blind spots and distorted views of what’s happening on their teams”* (Hinds 2023).

This brings us to HR as the second group to profit from our findings. Firstly, during the hiring process of new employees for the sales department. The attributes and the verbal expressions can serve for challenging job advertisements. During the job interviews, HR can specifically test the attributes and evaluate the applicant’s reaction. Thus, HR gets a fast idea if the applicant has the necessary IM for the potential position. Lastly, a new understanding of more specific sales training is provided. In collaboration with the sales managers, HR can develop specific training content to work on potential fields of development in terms of IM. This could include classical training, for instance, to improve communication skills. To create other attributes like evaluating or questioning, this could also include tandem approaches of complementary colleagues in sales to learn from each other, for instance, during customer visits or perspective swaps through job rotations.

Next to the managerial implications, our study provides further implications for sales students and related university sales courses. Sales students can reflect on their IM, especially if they consider a future employer in an innovative and competitive environment. Universities can work on the attributes found early in their students' careers if they consider our findings for structuring corresponding courses. This could include developing practice-oriented negotiations or specific training in selling situations with the help of the IM attributes.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES**

The limitations of our study open opportunities for future research activities. We concentrated on the GSA-market to find companies with innovative value propositions in corresponding markets. While this fits into the guidelines of qualitative research and sampling in the sales context (Rutherford et al. 2023), it remains a regional limitation in this part of Europe. Similar sampling in a different innovative market like Asia or the US could help to verify our results. Another limitation resulted from our triad-perspective approach as such. Gaining great insights from three different perspectives, we must deal with only 15 corresponding companies as empirical fundament. Convincing the companies to participate in our study with three people of very particular sales functions was challenging. Spending around 90 minutes of their regular working hours made it even more difficult. Accordingly, we had little influence on the concrete selection of the interviewees but were dependent on those recommended by our main contacts, resulting in an imbalanced gender distribution. A more balanced gender distribution and more participating companies could enhance our results' validity.

Despite the further results opportunities above, attributable to our study sample, we motivate future researchers to enlarge the research stream of innovation-commercialization with a specific focus on necessary attributes of the salesforce. Previous studies confirm the salesforce to be pivotal for innovation-commercialization performance, but there is still little knowledge about the relevant attributes of salespeople in this context. Our results can be a starting point for this. Further studies could concentrate on developing

training programs to meet the evaluated attributes and challenging our results with the expertise of experienced HR people to sharpen the target picture of future applicants. Building on our study's results, further research could focus on the design and implementation of training programs specifically tailored to develop IM attributes among sales professionals. This could involve, on the one hand, experimental studies to evaluate the effectiveness of different training approaches in enhancing innovation selling skills. On the other hand, this could include collaboration between academia and industry to develop curriculum modules that align with the skills and attributes valued in innovative and competitive sales environments. Developing these skills could start already in university courses to prepare further salespeople for B2B market environments with a high technology pace.

Academics could study how sales managers create an environment where new ideas can thrive and become innovative value. This research might involve looking at different ways managers lead their teams, communicate, and provide incentives to encourage innovative thinking among salespeople.

Our research elucidated the significance of the internal sales function in facilitating innovation commercialization. The presence of an IM within the internal sales team can greatly enhance the successful sale of innovative new products. Engaging in a comprehensive examination of the internal dynamics within the sales team and their influence on the innovation commercialization process represents a fertile area for academic exploration. Such inquiry may entail investigating the obstacles that impede the adoption of an IM within the internal team and devising effective strategies to address these challenges.

Further, the present study focuses solely on the perspectives of the sales department. The standpoint of customers purchasing innovative products may have an equally important role. They could, for instance, evaluate the attributes of the present study and provide a ranking of the most important ones from their point of view.

In addition, our study, particularly in the literature review, has revealed a notable disparity in the definition

and delineation of the terms "mindset" and "mentality". Therefore, it is advisable to initially capture various currents of thought on this topic through quantitative research. Subsequently, these could be further discussed and evaluated with experts in subsequent stages.

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