

KNOWLEDGE HUB ARTICLE

Why Sales Technology Rollouts Fail

The missing role of the salesperson in digital adoption

Based on research published in the Journal of Service Research
Xie, S., Kassemeyer, R., Habel, J., Lee, N. and Alavi, S. (2026)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Sales Technology Rollouts Fail

Organisations invest heavily in new sales technologies, such as CRM systems, e-commerce channels, sales enablement platforms and AI. Yet many of these investments underdeliver because employees or customers never fully use them.

Most thinking about adoption treats it as an individual decision: if people see the value, they will use the system. New research shows that in sales this is often not the case. A customer's use of a new technology frequently depends on a salesperson who can encourage it, or quietly hold it back. The authors call this **dual technology adoption**.

Studying an e-commerce launch at a European B2B supplier, covering 521 salespeople and 36,431 customers, the researchers found that customers' online buying reflected both their own situation and their salesperson's. Consultative salespeople selling broad product ranges drove less online adoption; salespeople handling many routine transactions drove more. Strikingly, a sceptical salesperson could hold back a customer who was otherwise well suited to buying online.

For sales leaders, the message is clear: launching a system and training people to use it is not enough. Leaders need to identify the people who influence adoption, make sure they benefit from it, and help them judge which customers it genuinely suits.

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This Knowledge Hub article translates recent research on technology adoption and digital transformation in sales into practical lessons for sales leaders.

The underlying study examined how salespeople influence customers' adoption of a new B2B e-commerce channel and developed a framework explaining why technology adoption often depends on relationships between users.

AT A GLANCE

- Technology adoption is often a social process, not only an individual decision.
- Salespeople shape whether customers adopt new digital channels, in both directions.
- Consultative sellers may resist channels they see as a threat to their advisory role.
- Customers follow their industry: peer adoption was the strongest customer-side driver.

01

SECTION ONE

Technology does not transform organisations. People do.

When organisations introduce new sales technologies, the focus is often on the technology itself: is the system powerful enough, is the investment justified, and have employees been trained?

But technology only creates value when people change their behaviour. A CRM system does not improve customer relationships unless salespeople use it well. An AI tool does not improve decisions unless employees build it into their daily work. A digital sales channel does not increase engagement unless customers choose to use it.

In sales, adoption rarely involves just one person. A customer may not decide alone whether to use a new platform. They often rely on a salesperson to explain the benefits, show how it works, or advise whether it suits them.

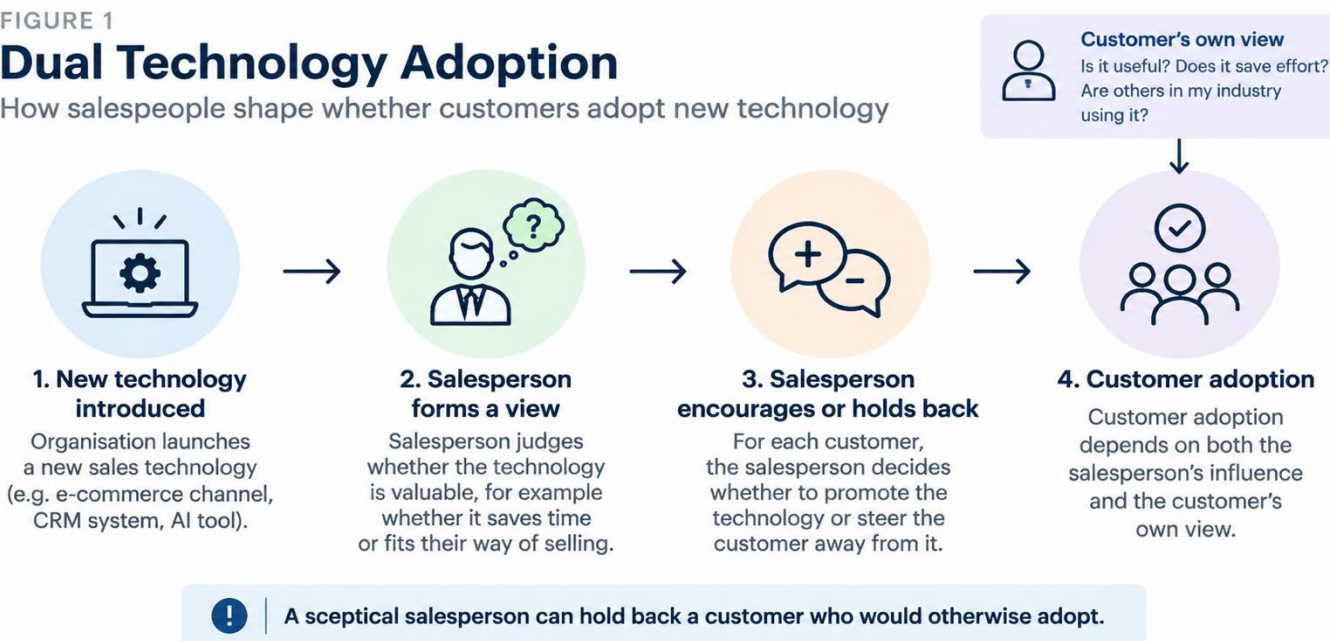
The research behind this article calls this **dual technology adoption**: situations where one person's view of a technology shapes whether another person adopts it. A salesperson first decides whether they value the technology themselves, and then decides, customer by customer, whether to encourage or discourage its use.

Imagine a company launching an online ordering platform. If salespeople do not believe in it, they will keep taking orders the traditional way, and many customers will never make the switch. The technology exists, but the expected transformation does not happen.

FIGURE 1

Dual Technology Adoption

How salespeople shape whether customers adopt new technology



Adapted from Xie et al. (2026), Journal of Service Research.

KEY TAKEAWAY

“A technology rollout is not complete when a system is launched. It is complete when the people who need to use and promote it have adopted it.”

02

SECTION TWO

The salesperson is often the missing link in digital adoption

Traditional approaches to technology adoption focus on the final user. Managers ask whether employees or customers think a technology is useful, easy to use and worth the effort.

These factors remain important. But the research shows that in many sales situations another question matters just as much:

Who influences whether the user adopts the technology?

In B2B sales, salespeople are the main connection between the organisation and the customer. They explain new processes, recommend solutions and shape how customers interact with the company. This means they affect technology adoption in two ways.

First, they decide whether they personally see value in the technology. If they believe it saves time or supports their selling, they are more likely to back it.

Second, they decide, customer by customer, whether to encourage adoption or quietly discourage it. A salesperson who sees online ordering as a time-saver may actively steer customers towards it. One who sees it as a threat to customer contact may keep taking orders in person.

Same technology, very different outcomes.

The study examined this in a B2B company introducing an e-commerce channel. Customers' online buying reflected not only their own circumstances but also their salesperson's. This is consistent with salespeople actively shaping adoption.

KEY TAKEAWAY

“Salespeople are not only technology users. They can become important drivers or influencers of adoption.”

QUESTIONS FOR SALES LEADERS

Before launching a new sales technology, ask:

- Who will influence whether customers or employees use this technology?
- Do those people understand why the change matters?
- Do they personally benefit from successful adoption?
- Are they equipped to explain the value to others?

03

SECTION THREE

What the research found

The study applied three well-established drivers of technology adoption (performance, effort and social influence) to both sides of the sale: the salesperson and the customer. Each driver mattered on both sides.

1. Performance: will this channel help me do my job well?

Salespeople who sold a wide range of products, typically the most consultative sellers, drove less customer e-commerce adoption. For them, online ordering can feel like a threat to the advisory role that makes them successful.

Customers who bought a wide range of products also adopted less, likely because they rely on advice that an online channel does not provide.

2. Effort: will this channel save me time?

Salespeople handling a high number of transactions drove more customer adoption. For them, every routine order that moves online frees time for higher-value work.

Customers who ordered frequently also adopted more, as e-commerce removes much of the admin involved in repeat purchasing.

3. Social influence: are people like me using it?

Customers adopted more when other companies in their industry were already ordering online. This was the strongest customer-side effect in the study.

Salespeople whose teammates generated more online revenue also saw more adoption among their customers. Part of this effect reflects shared team culture and management, not peer influence alone.

The salesperson's view can override the customer's

The authors single out one result: even when a customer is well suited to e-commerce, adoption falls if their salesperson is less convinced. Salespeople appear to judge customers' needs through the lens of their own experience, so a sceptical salesperson can hold back a customer who would benefit.

KEY TAKEAWAY

"A customer's adoption depends on how they see the technology, and on how their salesperson sees it."

04

SECTION FOUR

What sales leaders should do differently

The research points to five practical lessons for managing technology adoption.

1. Identify the people who influence adoption

Look beyond the direct users of a technology to the people who shape their behaviour: sales managers for their teams, salespeople for their customers, customer success teams for their accounts. Treat them as a core part of the adoption strategy.

2. Make sure they benefit when others adopt

Salespeople will only promote a channel that works for them. In the company studied, online orders counted toward salespeople's quotas, so reps earned the same whichever channel the customer used. Without this, a salesperson loses out every time a customer orders online, and has good reason to resist. Recognition matters too: sharing adoption results, for example on team dashboards, signals that driving adoption is valued.

3. Build conviction, and make promoting it easy

Train influencers on what the technology does for them and their customers, not just on its features, and show them how colleagues are succeeding with it. Keep the effort of promoting it low, for example with ready-made customer materials. The authors even suggest AI agents could nudge customers on a salesperson's behalf.

4. Train salespeople to judge fit from the customer's view

Because salespeople tend to project their own view onto customers, a sceptical rep may steer away a customer who would benefit. The authors recommend perspective-taking training, such as role plays that explore customers' channel needs as well as their product needs, so salespeople can tell which customers the technology genuinely suits.

5. Keep the end user in view

Customers' own perceptions still matter. Clear communication and an easy-to-use platform remain essential.

KEY TAKEAWAY

“Successful adoption requires more than teaching people how to use technology. It requires helping them understand why others should use it too.”

05

SECTION FIVE

Digital transformation starts at the customer interface

Technology projects are often managed as IT initiatives. Yet many digital transformations succeed or fail in everyday interactions between employees and customers.

The research shows that adoption can move through relationships between people. The authors suggest this may extend along longer chains:

- A senior leader decides to introduce a technology.
- A sales manager influences whether the sales team accepts it.
- Salespeople influence whether customers adopt it.
- Customers' experiences decide whether it creates business value.

If so, digital transformation requires alignment across the whole adoption chain. The authors highlight this idea for future research.

The key questions are therefore not only “Have we introduced the technology?” or “Have we trained our employees?”

The more important questions are:

- Do our salespeople believe this technology creates value?
- Do they benefit when customers adopt it?
- Can they tell which customers it genuinely suits?
- Have we removed barriers that make adoption difficult?

People do not adopt systems in isolation. They adopt them within relationships, teams and commercial environments.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Technology adoption is not achieved through implementation alone.

The organisations that gain the greatest value from digital transformation are those that understand the human side of adoption.

For sales leaders, this means treating frontline employees not only as technology users, but also as partners who influence whether change succeeds.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This article is based on:

**Xie, S., Kassemeier, R., Habel, J., Lee, N. and Alavi, S. (2026). Dual Technology Adoption. *Journal of Service Research*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10946705261471938>**

The study develops the concept of dual technology adoption: situations where one person influences another person's adoption of a technology. It proposes the Dual Adoption Model, formalises it mathematically and tests it with real sales data.

The researchers studied the introduction of an e-commerce channel at a European B2B company selling industrial consumables and tools to construction professionals. The data covered 521 salespeople and 36,431 customers over 36 months: 12 months before and 24 months after the launch.

Customers' e-commerce revenue was linked to both their own buying patterns and their salesperson's selling patterns, consistent with salespeople shaping customer adoption. Additional analyses, including a machine-learning benchmark of each customer's expected adoption and an analysis of first-time adoption, supported the main results.

Two limitations are worth noting. First, the study inferred salespeople's and customers' perceptions from sales data rather than measuring their attitudes directly. Second, it covers a single B2B firm in one industry, so the findings should be tested in other sectors such as pharmaceuticals and software.

ABOUT THE SALES EXCELLENCE HUB

Sales Excellence Hub

The Sales Excellence Hub is based at Warwick Business School and connects sales professionals, business leaders, and academic researchers to support evidence-based sales practice.

The Hub aims to transfer knowledge from academic research into sales practice, helping organisations and sales leaders address current challenges in areas such as sales management, incentive design, revenue growth, digital transformation, AI, professional development, and the future of the sales profession.

Through events, research, reports, and partner collaboration, the Sales Excellence Hub provides a platform for discussion, learning, and the development of actionable insights for the sales community.

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