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# Creating Discursive Channels: Generating and Disseminating Impactful Research Insights into the Strategic Sales Enablement of Retail Technology

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To meet the complex technology needs of retail clients, technology providers must work in a close partnership with their clients and co-envisage a strategic vision for the role that technology should play in the client's value chain. However, many providers lack the sales capabilities needed to do this. This article examines the need for providers to transition from transaction-oriented to solution selling-oriented approaches. To do so, the article explores the impact outcomes of a knowledge-exchange intervention co-designed with a partner from industry.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Building on empirical insights from an ongoing research programme that examines retail technology implementations, we developed a knowledge exchange intervention consisting of (1) planning discursive channels, (2) co-defining the scope, (3) co-developing knowledge, (3) executing the intervention and (5) assessing impact outcomes. Discursive channels—multi-lateral communication channels that allow researchers to work collaboratively with the research partner and other stakeholders—emerge as a critical knowledge-exchange mechanism to generate impact outcomes.

**Findings:** The knowledge-exchange intervention provides impact by enabling the industry partner to establish cross-functional solutions teams, assess retail clients' technological needs, aid decision-making, define barriers to implementation and develop a coaching approach to support clients' technological investments. Impact outcomes vary in magnitude, intensity, scope and duration and can also be unintentional where unplanned changes are embedded into practice.

**Originality:** The impact framework offers a roadmap to orchestrate impact outcomes that emerge from academic enquiries.

**Keywords:** Impact outcomes; Discursive channels; Knowledge-exchange intervention; Solution selling; Retail technology; Sales capabilities.

**Article Classification:** Original Research Article

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## INTRODUCTION

Marketing scholars must embrace the opportunity of producing directly translatable research insights with market and organisational impact (Wróblewska, 2021). Moving beyond traditional academic impact outputs (e.g., journal articles, conference papers), in this article, we use the term *impact* to refer to research outcomes that influence societal or organisational actors leading to substantive changes in the way these actors operate (de Ruyter et al., 2022). To delineate a pathway toward impact outcomes, we build on an ongoing research programme that investigates the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in the retail sector (see Bonetti et al., 2022 and web appendix A for further details). Within this context, we examine how knowledge gaps between technology providers and their less tech-savvy clients create challenges when selling AI solutions for use in retail. The strategic introduction of *discursive channels – multi-lateral communication channels that permit a research team to work collaboratively with research partners and other stakeholders* – allows for continuous informal knowledge exchange. This knowledge not only improves initial technology adoption decisions in the short term but further enhances long-term technology adoption and sustained use that may directly impact sales and market performance. This article outlines an intervention co-designed with an industry partner organisation to translate research insights into enhanced sales performance. The resulting framework can be used by future researchers working with industry partners to develop highly impactful research programmes.

### ***Substantive Problem Recognition***

To successfully deploy technology solutions, technology providers must work in a close partnership with their clients and co-envisage a strategic vision for the role that technology will play in the client's value chain. However, research conducted by McKinsey & Co. shows that many providers lack a long-term, solution-oriented mindset, focusing instead on transactional approaches to meet short-term sales targets (Boudewijn et al., 2019). Selling complex technology products requires specific sales capabilities (e.g., researching client needs, investing in relationships and networks and demonstrating advanced product knowledge) that many providers underestimate and do not emphasise in employee development. Taken together, these capabilities represent a firm's ability to organise the sales function and manage sales processes effectively and efficiently (Sleep et al., 2020).

This short-term transactional perspective fails to ensure technology adoption and sustained use, preventing providers from capitalising on the opportunity of proactively offering other products and services to further enhance clients' strategic objectives. This article examines how a targeted knowledge-exchange intervention involving account managers of a large technology provider impacted how these managers approach retail clients. The intervention supported the provider to develop the sales capabilities necessary to partner effectively on client strategic goals and excel as a leading solution-oriented firm.

The strategic enablement of sales capabilities is a complex process that requires educating and incentivising internal (e.g., employees) and external (e.g., suppliers, consultants) partners to improve their sales performance (Keeling et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2020). Strategic sales enablement requires coordinated transfers of explicit and tacit organisational knowledge (Plangger et al., 2020). While knowledge transfers can be impactful in developing sales capabilities (e.g., Peterson et al., 2020), practitioners and academics struggle to understand how organisationally-directed knowledge transfers (i.e., dissemination of organisational knowledge to employees) can be orchestrated to achieve optimal results. The present research shows that knowledge transfers can be strategically developed to encourage partnerships between providers and clients. The focal aim of these partnerships is to proactively

modify existing retail practices through the creation of new sales capabilities and to re-align existing ones toward long-term market performance.

### ***Empirical Research Context***

To investigate the strategic enablement of sale capabilities, we collaborated with a large international technology provider operating across multiple sectorial contexts. We selected AI implementation in retailing operations as a fruitful context to examine the introduction and leveraging of discursive channels toward enhancing firm market performance. We focused on this empirical context as the knowledge gap between technology providers and retailers is imposing. Providers are chiefly concerned with creating sophisticated technology designed to enhance existing, largely less technologically sophisticated market activities, while retailers are primarily dedicated to curating and promoting products for resale. Although technology providers are tuned into the pure data capture, the analytic potential of AI-enabled products and services cannot be achieved fully without retailers' understanding of lived merchandise management glitches and customer experience factors that lead to retail sales. Discursive channels that facilitate knowledge transfer across this gap can educate technology providers on retail practices and retailers on technological capabilities that can help employees manage merchandise and customer data and provide more enriching customer experiences.

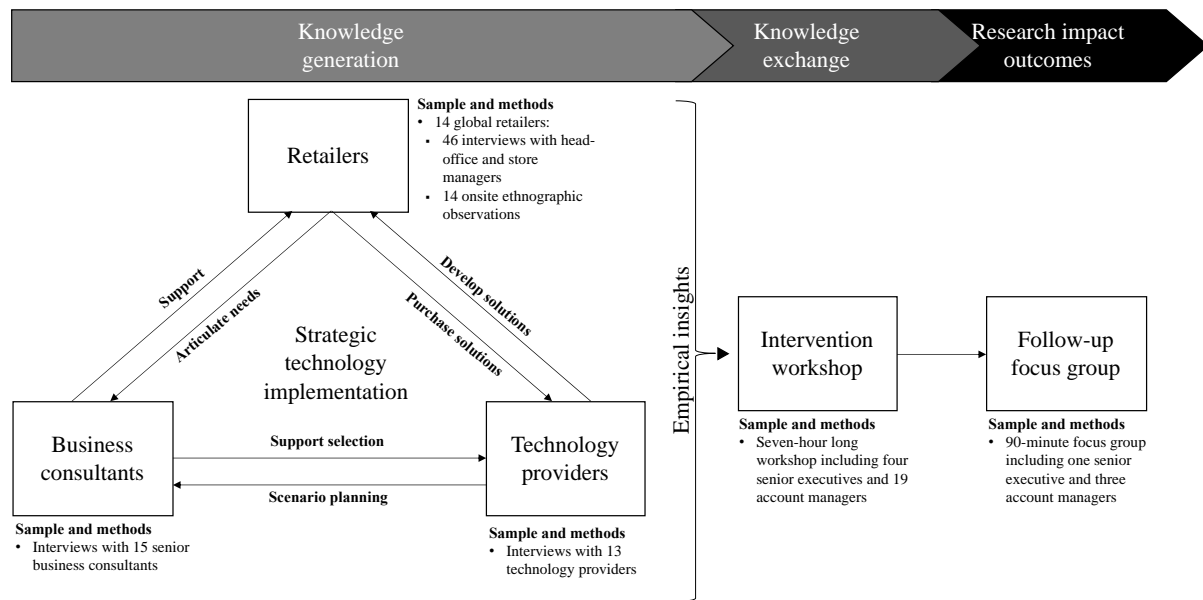
We worked with the provider's business unit that implements AI-powered retail technologies, including mobile apps, internet-of-things (IoT) applications, RFID systems, smart beacons, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, smart mirrors and interactive screens. Through multiple brainstorming sessions with one of the authors, senior executives recognised that account managers struggled to understand the needs of their retail clients and did not fully appreciate the strategic role that technology could play as a change catalyst. Reflecting on these challenges, a senior executive pointed out that their firm needed to invest in supporting these managers "to use all information to understand their retail clients and transform [these insights] into a strategy to enable [account managers] to solve retailers' issues by helping them embark on a transformation journey". The knowledge gap between clients' demands and the industry partner's market offering prevented account managers from adopting solution-oriented approaches. This led to missed sales opportunities and under-satisfied clients, thus presenting the rationale for our collaborative research project.

While AI-enabled retail solutions are characterised by significant knowledge gaps, such gaps are not unique. Mitigation of knowledge gaps is imminently transferable to other contexts that reach across expertise domains (e.g., immersive metaverse technologies that enhance sales and ground logistics that unite consumers and their purchases, architectural solutions brought in to enhance service delivery, etc.), thus supporting the generalizability of our research findings and the broader relevance and applicability of the proposed impact framework.

### ***Orchestrating Impact Outcomes***

Recent conceptual work on the critical role of impact in academic research (e.g., de Ruyter et al., 2022; Reed et al., 2021) challenges researchers to produce scholarly contributions that generate substantive changes with reverberating effects on multiple stakeholder groups. Reflecting this ethos, our study is designed to not only produce high-quality research impact but, more importantly, impact outcomes for our industry partner, the technology provider (see Figure 1). We generated knowledge from three important groups of stakeholders (retailers, business consultants, and other technology providers) and triangulated findings to unpack interactions between these groups. Then, we used empirical insights to orchestrate a knowledge exchange intervention designed to enable the provider's account managers to develop solution-oriented approaches that better account for the diverse demands of retail clients.

**Figure 1: Phasic pathway toward impact**



By systematically tracking the development of discursive channels, we contribute to understanding how research impact can be generated. We identify how these channels emerge and can be deployed by researchers to jointly generate and disseminate knowledge with multiple stakeholders. Furthermore, we develop an impact framework that delineates how generating research impact involves (1) planning discursive channels with an industry partner, (2) co-defining the scope of knowledge generation and exchange by taking into account the specific needs of the partner, (3) co-developing knowledge, (4) executing a knowledge-exchange intervention that consolidates research insights and (5) assessing the magnitude, intensity, scope, and duration of impact.

## WORKING WITH MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS TO GENERATE KNOWLEDGE

Aiming to support our industry partner in enabling solution-oriented sales capabilities, we undertook a multi-sided ethnographic research project encompassing 74 interviews and 14 on-site retail observations over five years with stakeholders involved in the strategic decisions and implementation of retailing technologies (i.e., retail executives, business consultants and other technology providers (See web appendix A). The fashion sector witnessed substantial investments in the deployment of retail technologies to enhance the customer experience (e.g., smart mirrors) or increase operational efficiency (e.g., RFID, inventory management systems) (Grewal et al., 2020). While several retailers successfully implemented innovative solutions, many struggled to develop a strategic vision for long-term sustained use of new technologies.

Successful technology implementation is often the product of the effective collaboration between clients, external business consultants and technology providers. To help our industry partner foster this collaborative mindset, we sought the participation of these different stakeholder groups and captured their diverse and rich perspectives. In particular, we engaged in discussions with multiple retailers that offered invaluable insights into the strategic rationale for deploying retail technologies and specific organisational complexities and implementation barriers. Business consultants provided their multi-sectorial perspective on innovation trends and shared their understanding of the retail sector's complexities and potential bottlenecks affecting retail technology implementations. This group was instrumental in elucidating how retailers formulate their needs for new technologies, which is a process that

often suffers from a myopic vision focused on internal priorities and a lack of technical expertise.

Beyond our industry partner, we examined 12 additional technology providers to capture a wider spectrum of commercial approaches to the selling and implementation of retailing technologies. This allowed us to understand the challenges that these providers face when developing solutions for their retail clients. Furthermore, technology providers often interact with business consultants to develop different scenarios for the successful implementation of retailing technologies for their common retail clients. Mapping this interaction was essential to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role that these multiple actors play in the technology implementation process. This process allowed us to support our partner in developing effective collaboration strategies with all the stakeholders involved in the technology implementation process.

### **The Knowledge-Exchange Process: Creating Discursive Channels**

Orchestrating effective knowledge-exchange interventions requires collaborative efforts to establish and maintain continuous feedback loops between all parties involved. We call these collaborative efforts to develop multi-lateral communication flows, discursive channels. These channels are established to allow research teams to continuously check that the research remains aligned with the agreed objectives. As knowledge generation progresses, discursive channels enable researchers to probe their analysis of the empirical results, thus aiding the interpretative validity of the research findings. In the knowledge-exchange process, researchers can employ discursive channels to distil the knowledge generated into actionable insights that produce the impact outputs and outcomes envisioned. This is a complex process that requires multiple rounds of brainstorming and discussion with a research partner to ensure that the knowledge exchange intervention is impactful. By connecting the knowledge-generation and knowledge-exchange processes, discursive channels enable the continuous collaboration between the research team and the industry partner and provide a platform for co-creating both high-quality outputs and highly impactful outcomes.

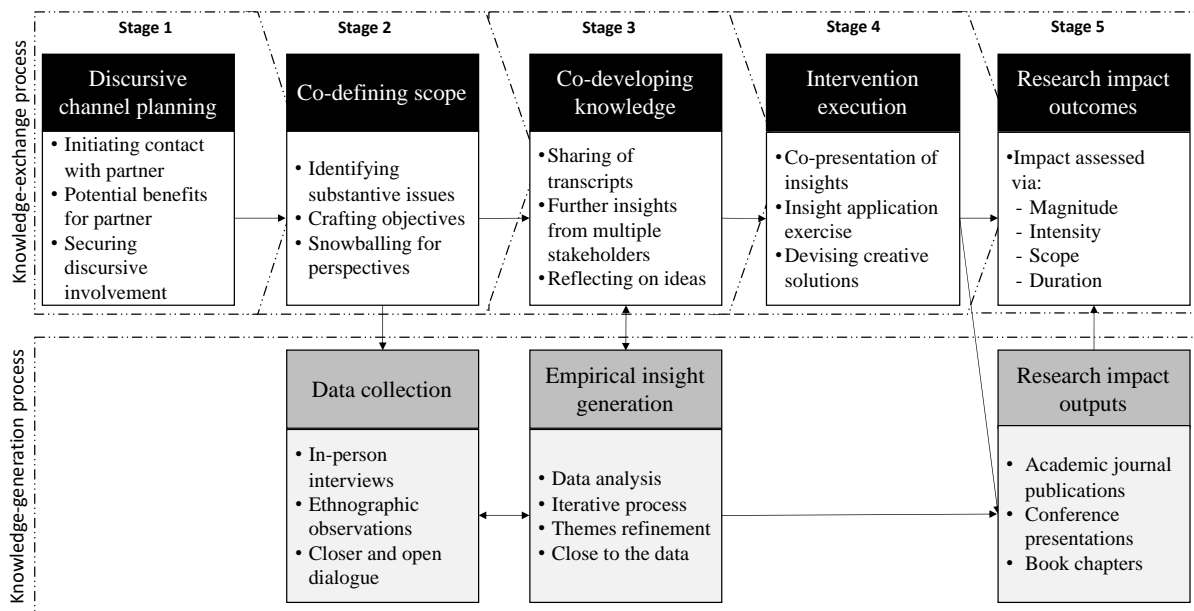
We consolidated the empirical insights that emerged in the knowledge-generation process to develop a knowledge-exchange intervention in collaboration with our industry partner. We followed a five-stage process (Figure 2) that consists of (1) planning for discursive channels that facilitate (2) collaboratively scoping, (3) jointly developing and (4) executing a knowledge-exchange intervention leading to (5) impact outcomes.

First, we planned for discursive channels to facilitate knowledge exchange. Operationally, we established these channels with our industry partner by designing information documents that detailed the potential benefits of participating in the project. We agreed on a contact schedule to ensure collaboration in all stages of the research project. Securing the discursive involvement of our partner was essential to enable us to continuously assess the overall project's ecological validity and the findings' interpretative validity. Upon reflection, this stage was critical and challenging as it involved gaining the research partner's commitment and trust. To this end, it was essential to be completely transparent about the project progression, emerging issues and potential limitations.

Second, working collaboratively with the industry partner, we identified the substantive issues that needed further investigation to inform the partner's future marketing and sales efforts directed toward retail clients. This collaborative approach helped us co-define the initial project's scope and craft specific objectives for the subsequent knowledge-exchange intervention. Practically, we achieved this through several scoping sessions involving individuals operating at different levels within the partner organisation, from senior decision-makers to junior account managers. The discursive channels set up with the industry partner enabled an open and continuous dialogue about the key issues investigated that considers the

perspectives of different internal stakeholders. More importantly, through these channels, we obtained contacts of retail clients and other external stakeholders (e.g., business consultants and other technology providers) who offered invaluable perspectives on determining the intervention's final scope and specific objectives. This stage required working collaboratively with the partner to reflect critically on existing practices. This assessment was complex as employees were often afraid of challenging established ways of working, particularly when this involved criticising other organisational divisions or senior managers. Providing clear and consistent information on data management, protection of informants' anonymity, and findings disclosure was essential to guarantee the success of this second stage.

**Figure 2: Impact framework - Creating discursive channels to aid knowledge exchange**



The third stage involved developing a knowledge-exchange intervention informed by our empirical insights. Designing an effective intervention required us to continuously review our analysis and results with our industry partner to ensure relevance with the agreed objectives. We shared interview transcripts with our industry partner and sought their assistance in checking the validity of our analysis and interpretation by organising several project-update discussions. This iterative and collaborative approach led to the delineation of three thematic areas for the knowledge exchange intervention – namely, developing a structured approach to assessing the client’s needs, enhancing account managers’ understanding of technology as a change agent and coordinating multiple stakeholders when designing consultancy strategies for retail clients. Since this stage involved mapping out key changes in the partner’s strategy, it was important to include views from multiple internal stakeholders operating across different internal functions. These stakeholders often perceived issues differently, leading to conflicting views of the strategic aspect to be prioritised that the research team had to carefully reconcile through continuous and open discussions.

Fourth, we agreed on a format to effectively share research insights across the three thematic areas identified in the previous stage. The intervention took the format of a full-day workshop involving four senior executives and 19 account managers working in a variety of sales and marketing roles across the partner organisation. The workshop began with an interactive discussion aimed at sharing lived experiences of the needs of retail clients and of the strategies implemented by account managers to address those needs. Having established a baseline understanding of existing sales practices, a series of role-play activities enabled

participants to identify challenges and opportunities faced when approaching their clients. Finally, workshop participants co-developed a roadmap for effective solution selling that was informed by our research insights. Key milestones of this roadmap represent four interconnected sales capabilities that our industry partner desired to enable – namely establishing cross-functional solutions teams (Capability 1), examining retail clients’ technological needs and decision-making approach (Capability 2), understanding retail clients’ internal and external barriers to technology implementation (Capability 3) and developing a coaching approach to support retail clients’ technological change efforts (Capability 4).

Fifth, aiming to assess the impact of our research findings and the knowledge exchange intervention, we organised a follow-up focus group with a sample of workshop participants. The focus group took place approximately three years after the workshop and involved a 90-minute critical reflection on how the solutions co-created during the workshop impacted account managers’ sales approach toward clients. Through the focus group, the research team assessed how participants perceived the intervention and the degree to which they were able to action the co-designed roadmap for effective solution selling. Moreover, the workshop outlined how exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic further challenged the organisation’s ways of operating. Participants stressed that sales capabilities enabled through the co-developed knowledge exchange intervention helped them navigate clients’ demands of technological pivoting. We discuss the magnitude, intensity, scope and duration of the impact generated by our research in the following section.

## REALISING RESEARCH IMPACT OUTCOMES

While there are many ways to assess research impact outcomes (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2022; Kostoff, 1994), we find our project realised this impact in four key dimensions: magnitude, intensity, scope, and duration. While most studies focus on one or two impact dimensions, we evaluate and offer evidence of impact realisation over all four dimensions. Although each dimension may vary independently, we posit that the dimensions are likely to vary in patterned ways, as evidenced by Table 1. We find that impact outcomes can also be unintentional where changes beyond the initial scope are radically altered in practice. Below, we unpack each dimension and examine how the knowledge generated and exchanged with the industry partner influenced the development of effective solution selling capabilities.

### *Impact Magnitude*

Our study’s *impact magnitude* – the size of the change brought about by an intervention (Kostoff, 1994; McKenna, 2021) – can be measured by the level of investment and level of disruption of existing organisational activities. The intervention was intended to optimise how account managers perceived their technology products to improve sales and customer service. The follow-up focus group revealed that the intervention reframed how the industry partner perceived their technology solutions and enabled account managers to become more effective at assessing retail clients’ technological needs (Capability 2). Focus group participants stressed that this workshop aided them in switching their perception of their technology products from a set of transactions that assisted their retail client in enhancing consumer experience to an enabler of digital operations through cross-selling and up-selling (Capability 2):

“The Covid-19 pandemic has forced businesses to navigate stormy seas. This led us to work with our clients and adapt strategy and tactics week to week. Because brands have to adapt their digital strategy to all possible buying platforms, we are supporting them with an increasing number of technologies, ranging from social networks to in-store applications. We started from digital signage, and we ended up planning for and



implementing solutions concerning also virtual mirrors, smart shelving, Wi-Fi and self-checkouts. These in-store solutions were also backed up with data analytics, including in-store analytics and cloud hosting.” (Senior Executive)

This quote demonstrates a mindset change from short to long-term perspectives and from transaction to proactive partnering for cross-selling toward continuing success (Capability 4). Likewise, data reveal a shift away from a discrete exchange toward progressively deeper offering embeddings through up-selling

“We recently offered our concept of data-driven retail to several of our retail clients. Since several retailers are struggling to gather data from customers and accurately analyse it to ensure they draw the correct conclusions, we have provided our location analytics solution. This involves location analytics, smart shelving, cloud hosting and IoT video sensors. The combination of these technology solutions has allowed our clients to identify new store locations, enhance customer solutions with intelligently laid-out stores, track stock levels, and monitor customer interactions with products.” (Senior Executive)

This change in mindset involved a more structured approach focused on business outcomes that encouraged account managers to find comprehensive solutions for their retail clients instead of focusing on a one-off product transaction (Capability 2, Capability 4).

### ***Impact Intensity***

Organisations measure *impact intensity* – the level of institutional effort in an intervention (Ferguson et al., 2022) – by assessing changes in organisational structures and the level of employee engagement within those structures. Participants in the follow-up focus group revealed that the intervention’s activities helped bring together cross-functional teams that offered diverse perspectives on developing effective technology solutions for clients (Capability 1). Moreover, the intervention helped participants to recognise and better understand changing organisational dynamics within their clients and to identify emerging roles (e.g., Chief Digital Officer) in charge of digital innovation decisions (Capability 3). This helped the partner strategize with clients on supporting and managing technological change, including which human resource investments were needed (e.g., new roles, team composition, skills training) and any required changes to their organisational structure (Capability 4). This advanced understanding of evolving organisational structures allowed account managers to produce highly targeted sales pitches.

### ***Impact Scope***

Among our participants, the *impact scope* – the areas of the operation that change (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014) – was the development of more effective and efficient sales functions and processes geared toward a solution selling approach. The focus group participants reported that the intervention did indeed, as expected, provide account managers with tools to better understand why and how their retail clients decide to buy their technology products (Capability 2). First, the intervention provided a helicopter view of retail clients’ technological needs by sharing the details of emergent issues and opportunities arising from the project’s data. Second, it enabled the co-creation of a clear and effective roadmap for implementing a solution selling approach that is informed by current research insights (Capability 4).

### ***Impact Duration***

In our research, *impact duration* – the timeline where impact is registered (Lavin et al., 2022) – consisted of immediate (short), six months to one year (medium), and three years (long) timelines. In the short term, the follow-up focus group revealed that, for the first time, individuals from different teams came together to share issues and co-develop solutions (Capability 1). This led to a better understanding of existing sales approaches that needed to change. In the medium-term, focus group participants reported that the intervention enabled account managers to identify key decision-makers in the clients' organisational structure and to better recognise the strategic needs and priorities of retail clients (Capability 2). Reflecting on the long-term impact of the intervention, the focus group participants concurred that account managers are now better equipped to develop solutions that address evolving clients' demands (Capability 3, Capability 4). These adaptive commercial capabilities have proven very useful given the dramatic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the retail sector that triggered a need to pivot quickly through carefully orchestrated technology solutions. According to the follow-up focus group participants, while our research did not address this macro issue specifically, it provided account managers with the tools to become more effective in responding to change (Capability 3).

## **ETHICS OF IMPACT**

The impact of our research was defined and examined from the perspective of our industry partner, the technology provider. Although this partner has a comprehensive view of the retail industry since it collaborates with multiple retail clients, other technology providers, and business consultants, we have to be aware that our research partner provides its own perspective. This perspective can be biased and offers only a partial picture of the issues investigated.

We formulated the goals of our knowledge exchange intervention by taking into account the partner's needs to enable sales capabilities for effective solution selling. While we focused primarily on generating impact outcomes consistent with the negotiated goals, we left room for the emergence of unintended impact outcomes. The follow-up focus group revealed that the intervention had several unintended consequences. Unexpectedly, the intervention helped both senior executives and account managers handle changes in retail technology and consumption trends caused by the pandemic (e.g., altered retail channel preferences). The intervention aided account managers to support their clients in pivoting to digital retail channels to reflect changing consumer preferences. While our research could not foresee how consumers would react in the face of a global pandemic, a senior executive suggested that the intervention provided employees with a more flexible ability to examine their clients' current conditions and the market contexts where they operate.

Furthermore, unexpectedly, findings from the follow-up focus group indicate that the intervention helped both executives and other employees within the industry partner manage the balance of power between sales, marketing and technology functions. Participants reported that they now open lines of communication with important internal stakeholders before deciding on, and presenting a solution to, their clients.

Finally, our research findings and subsequent intervention unexpectedly inspired the partner to enhance their internal knowledge-exchange efforts by developing a formal approach to capture and disseminate strategic insights with internal and external stakeholders. Account managers can now share ideas via a shared repository and obtain cross-functional feedback and suggestions that enhance the overall quality of their sales proposals to clients.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Even under the most orchestrated change scenarios, research impact is variable. Research efforts that facilitate the creation of discursive channels to initiate knowledge-exchange processes can foster the magnitude, intensity, scope, and duration of impact outcomes. These impact outcomes can manifest in unexpected ways that collide to generate pervasive changes within and across organisations. By examining orchestrated knowledge-generation and knowledge-exchange processes in a commercial exchange context with an imposing knowledge gap, such as technology providers and retailers, this article demonstrates how discursive channels built collaboratively with an industry partner can lead to multiple impact outcomes that benefit the partner by fostering the development of sales capabilities for effective solution selling.

**Table 1: Realising research impact**

Impact dimension	Impact insights	Impact evidence from the post-project workshop – Selected informants’ quotes
Magnitude	Different role of technology as an enabler (intended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Now we see the technology as an enabler of digital operations. This involved a complete change of mindset from our side, and not just a single piece of technology.” (Account Manager 3)</li> <li>• “Three years ago, our approach was very technological: <i>You [retail client] need that [technology solution], I'm going back to my office, make something up, and then this is the technology.</i> Our approach right now is more focused on business outcomes: <i>What and how do you [retail client] feel your retail management works? Where do you need to improve?</i> And from there, maybe we are going to find an overall solution with the technology, of course, that could help the retail client digitalise its operation, being the ones in the retail store, or in a different area or in the office. And so that path has been followed during this year. I find myself personally in a very different situation than three years ago.” (Account Manager 2)</li> </ul>
	Different role of retail post-pandemic (unintended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The [intervention] could not foresee the change in the relationship between the shop and the other channels that the company has. It could not foresee that the shop should not [operate] in conflict with other channels, but as something that helps accelerate sales. Still, the [intervention] made use grasp the technological push and societal trend changes that would inevitably lead to [omnichannel retailing], thus helping [us] face changes brought by the pandemic.” (Senior Executive)</li> </ul>
Intensity	Roles and structure changes within retail clients leading to new approaches within technology partner (intended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There are new roles inside [the client organisation]. Before, we didn’t share information and we didn’t approach [these organisational structures] in the right way. During the last few years, we [have heard] about chief digital officers. That is a role that before, five years ago, didn’t exist.” (Account Manager 2)</li> <li>• “If I look back three years ago, my only interface inside of the client was the ICT people, the purchasing department. Today it is another world. If I have to see the problem with the client, it is to have the right interface, where we know right now which are the interfaces inside of the client. So maybe Marketing Manager, Digital Transformation Officer, Security Officer. But the approach is completely different from the approach of three years ago.” (Account Manager 2)</li> </ul>

	Bringing different perspectives around the table on same issues, triggering internal changes (intended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The workshop that we had was very useful. For the first time, we gathered different parts of the company, different functions, and different people around the table to speak about our strategy and roadmap for digital solutions for retailers. All this was broken down into a few issues that we identified at the time. Every function was bringing up something. For example, the difficulty was to be recognised as a consultant in this particular space, while maybe say our technicians were more focused on other issues around commercialising such solution. So, for the first time, we laid out all the problems, and we had a frank conversation.” (Account Manager 1)</li> <li>• “I believe it [workshop] triggered new partnerships and new collaborations with third parties. I remember the period right after our workshop was very intense. We were scheduling meetings; account planning focused just on our digital roadmap for retailers. And of course, there was a follow-up meeting with Marketing where we at least focused on which partner, which third party could be more relevant to our digital strategy.” (Account Manager 1)</li> </ul>
	Foreseeing new roles and structures within partner post-pandemic (unintended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The workshop helped foresee correctly one thing, which is the balance inside our organisation, between IT and other stakeholders from marketing, from operations, from e-commerce, from sales and from retail account managers.” (Senior Executive)</li> </ul>
Scope	Changes in practices of partner: finding overall solutions to client issues and needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The approach to the client has been changing a lot. We are trying to transform from a telecommunications company to a technology company. This was a push, a very strong push that was coming internally. We have been trying to implement this change. The approach initially three years ago was just: <i>I have to sell something. I have my portfolio, and I have to sell this to the client, some part of my portfolio.</i> The outcome of the [intervention] was to try to have a helicopter view of the client. So, try to better understand their needs. Maybe this is the key point of the workshop. We now have a quite clear idea about the client needs, and all the actions that we take are based on the project and on the client needs.” (Account Manager 3)</li> <li>• “When I started to work as Account Manager, my goal was to sell data, networking, or the mobility, or... Now my goal is to find how I can find a mobility solution to improve the business of my client, but it's very different from my point of view. Prior to this, I thought about a certain number of services and products. Now, I have to think about the client's needs. It's a complete change of mindset.” (Account Manager 2)</li> </ul>
	Changes in internal policies, documents (unintended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The approach now is more structured; we have a very clear idea about the movement, about the needs of the client. And we have this document that we share, not only with the salespeople. Just an example, if I want to share my strategy in a global way, with all the national Account Managers around the world, we can have a unique repository with the strategy, with the after project, with the needs starting usually for three years.” (Account Manager 3)</li> </ul>
Duration	Short: Immediate impact – bring people together, share issues and devise creative solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The workshop helped share for the first time how we would go about approaching our retail clients, sharing issues, devising a roadmap.” (Account Manager 1)</li> </ul>

	<p>Medium: 6 months - 1 year – roles changing and new approach with retail clients</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Every six months we need to find a new approach for luxury clients because they want to change technology, I don't know... One month ago, we were talking with Gucci about one technology we had never heard anything about before. And the people we are speaking with at our retail clients are changing.” (Account Manager 2)</li> </ul>
	<p>Long: 3 years impact – change in approach with retail clients, understanding their needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The big wall that I find, and I have found during these three years, is to be recognised not only as a telecommunications provider. We start right now to be considered as an alternative to other competitors, to new competitors. Because right now, we are competing with Accenture. We are competing with system integrators and cloud providers. But for sure, the starting point is to understand the client's needs that a lot of times, in the past, we didn't know because the approach was ‘<i>Okay, I have the mobile, I have the fixed line, I understand you.</i>’ But we didn't really know the needs of the client. Right now, the approach has completely changed.” (Account Manager 1)</li> </ul>

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## Web Appendix

**Table A1 - Details of retailer sample**

Retailer	Head office	Number of stores	Positioning	Types of AI implementation	Number of informants <sup>†</sup>	Roles	
						Head office level	Store level
1	Italy	2,378	Premium	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	3	Senior Executive; Retail Supervisor	Store Manager
2	United States	Over 1,500	Lower premium	Digital signage, interactive screens, employee operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	4	Senior Marketing Manager; VP Operations; Digital Communications Manager	General Manager Global Flagships
3	United Kingdom	Over 200	Lower premium	Employee operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	2	Senior national retail manager	Store Manager
4	United Kingdom	Over 100	Lower premium	Digital signage, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	2	Senior Executive	Store Manager
5	United Kingdom	863	Premium	Digital signage, interactive screens, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	2	Management Information System Director	Store Manager
6	United Kingdom	510	Fast fashion	Digital signage, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets, smart mirrors, AR, VR, beacons	2	Head of Retail Global Flagship	Operations Brand Manager & Talent Management Store Management
7	Netherlands	Over 400	Lower premium	Digital signage, digital price tags, RFID, operational apps & devices	2	Senior Executive	General Manager flagship store
8	Spain	Over 2,250	Fast fashion	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps & devices, checkout tablets, self-checkout tills, magic mirrors, AR	3	Senior Executive	Store Director; Department Operations Manager
9	United Kingdom	23	Sportswear	Digital signage, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets, AR, beacons	3	Head of Retail; Director of Technology and Logistics	General Manager Clubhouse
10	United Kingdom	Over 350	Fast fashion	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets, smart mirrors	2	Customer Director	Deputy Store Manager
11	United Kingdom	465	Premium	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps & devices, checkout tablets, smart mirrors	7	Global Director of Retail Experience; Five senior executives (2 group interviews)	Flagship Store Manager
12	United Kingdom	1,519	Fast fashion	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps & devices, checkout tablets, self-checkout tills, smart mirrors	4	Head of Product and Digital Stores; Product Owner Retail Technology	Store Manager; Commercial Manager (in-store)
13	Germany	1,190	Sportswear	Digital signage, interactive screens, RFID, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets, smart mirrors	4	Director of Global Real Estate; Director Business Solutions - RFID; Director of Customer Experience	Senior Store Manager
14	Italy	641	Premium	Digital signage, operational apps and devices, checkout tablets	6	Five senior executives (Group interview)	Store Manager

<sup>†</sup>Total number of informants in the retailer sample = 46; Total number of interviews = 34

**Table A2 - Details of technology provider and business consultant samples**

<b>Technology Providers</b>			<b>Business Consultants</b>		
<b>Role</b>	<b>Type of AI technology managed</b>		<b>Role</b>	<b>Type of AI technology managed</b>	
1	Senior Product Manager	Mobile apps, web, IoT, Wi-Fi, analytics, RFID; beacons, CRM, smart mirrors, interactive screens	1	Co-Founder & Creative Director	Co-retail lab gathering technologists, retailers, entrepreneurs, researchers and makers
2	Principal & Senior Technology Consultant	3D body scanning, AI	2	Business Manager	AR; VR; AI; wearable tech
3	Sales Manager UK & Ireland	Retail electronic dynamic pricing label, RFID, smart mirrors	3	Journalist and Innovation Consultant	Various, latest innovative tech in retailing
4	Head of Product Management	VR experience; AR, AI, tablets, digital signage	4	Head of Fashion Innovation	AR; VR; AI; wearable tech
5	CEO	AR, virtual fitting room, magic mirror	5	Interim Director	Payment services, payment systems with AI, POS systems, beacons
6	CEO	Smart mannequins with AI	6	Consultant & Business Coach	Various, AI in retailing
7	Founder & CEO	3D scanner, AI powered app	7	Executive Consultant and Director	Virtual reality, 3D, blockchain
8	Co-Founder and CEO	Theft-proof AI scan, pay and leave shopping solution	8	CEO	E-commerce website providers, AR, IoT, wearable tech, mass-customization online
9	CEO	3D body scanning, VR	9	Chief Marketing Officer	Digital signage, interactive screens, Wi-Fi; expertise on AI
10	Founder & CEO	AR, magic mirrors, VR, apps, body scanner, beacon, Bluetooth	10	Creative Director	AR solutions
11	Director	3D and virtual reality	11	Coach, Strategic Consultant & Lecturer	Fashion and tech expert
12	Vertical Solutions Architect, Retail Sector	Networks, Mobility and Collaboration tools to Data-Centre, Cloud, IoT, Big Data and Analytics, Wi-Fi, beacons	12	Managing Director	Various, latest innovative tech in retailing
13	Product Marketing Manager EMEA	Hololens, Kinect in store, Bing, AR mirrors, AI phone apps, big data	13	Chief Futurist	AR, magic mirrors, digital content, wearable tech, apps, holograms
			14	Senior Partner and Managing Director	Fashion and tech expert
			15	Founder and CEO	Various, latest trends in beauty and fashion



**Table A3 - Interview protocol across retailers, consultants and technology providers**

Topic area	Themes covered and questions
Introduction	Participant's role in the retailer/ consultancy/ tech agency, for how long, whether the role has changed within the organization, previous roles
Motivations for retailer's adoption of AI technology in their practices	Way in which decisions are taken regarding AI adoption – who is involved, how these decisions come about, influences on decisions What are the motivations moving the retailer's decisions for adopting (or non-adopting) AI (e.g. operational motivations; experiential motivation; etc.)?
Type(s) of AI technology adopted by retailer (materiality)	Invite participant to tell the story of their experience of AI in retailing. Which type(s) of AI have been adopted by the retailer? Which retailer has adopted which type(s) of AI technology? Which type(s) of AI does the participant deal with/ provides/ advises on?
Competences/ practice enablement	Processes involved in adoption and implementation of AI by the retailer for employees' competences development; involving e.g. degree of collaborative practice change with store level; role of store; type of training and communication Negative externalities (if any) that the retailer may encounter concerning employees' adoption of AI (e.g. job loss; reduced employee-consumer interaction; employees' tech skills; etc.); meanings used to overcome those negative externalities Feel free to talk about different AI examples within the retailer / retail clients if that helps
Meanings for change in practice	Processes involved in adoption and implementation of AI by the retailer concerning meaning for change in employees' practice; involving e.g. incentives; role changes; degree of involvement of employees Feel free to talk about different AI examples within the retailer / retail clients if that helps
Wrap-up	Retailer's future/ upcoming plans for AI in retail practices/ observed trends? Future implications? Do you have any other comments about AI initiatives in retail practices you would like to share?