

## Cognitive Skills in Sales for Anticipatory Thinking



A Slice of History for Sales



Spotlight



Must Read



Have a Laugh

## A Slice of History for Sales

Insights from past for tomorrow

### Back to the Future Again

World is agog in excitement and fear over what new technologies driven by the AI wave can do to jobs, professions, industries, businesses and nations. There is widespread uncertainty and anxiety. But is this new?

A dive into our archives turned up a Focus feature written almost 3 decades ago in June 1998, on Emerging Technologies with a sub text that bravely announced “Scholars assemble a comprehensive forecast of coming technologies”

Key excerpts from the vintage article, clearly indicate a mood that was not very different then:



- In almost all scientific and technological fields, there is revolutionary innovation occurring. This 'sea-change' is driven primarily by the Information Technology but it is much larger in scope. Really speaking, we are not dealing with an information revolution but with a technology revolution.
- Forecasting Technology revolves around crucial time horizons. Five to ten years of forecasting is fairly predictable and falls in the realm of market research. While those more than 30-40 years can only be speculative. This leaves a 10-20 year window to make useful forecasts
- Most of the new technologies under study will arrive between the years 2003 and 2025. It is quite certain that all areas of endeavour are undergoing a serious transformation that in turn will transfer society. The four IT fields Hardware, Software, Communication and Information Services will herald the wave of innovation
- IT may lead but advances may be slower than conventional wisdom suggests. Entertainment on demand is not expected until 2003. It is only in 2018 that fifty percent of all goods in the US are sold through information services. Web TV with telephone capabilities may be in wide use only in 2005 or 2006. Intelligent Software agents in routine use may be seen only in 2009
- The helpful robot servants may arrive in 2016. Promising advances in nanotechnology and Microscopic machines, are indicated.
- News and mail can be filtered by sophisticated software. Expert systems may see routine use as surrogate doctors, lawyers and other professionals
- Alternative forms of energy, environmental management and transportation will make a serious transformation in lifestyles
- From all these forecasts, mindboggling in their magnitude, one message is crystal clear. No single nation can provide the necessary resources to mount huge projects such as planetay energy grid. If society wishes to pursue these goals, a profound restructuring of international relations lies ahead.

It is fascinating that many of the optimistic predictions came true ahead of time. And very few of the associated fears came to pass. As poet Arthur Hugh Clough reminded us – “If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars”

Reading the article afresh is a revelation. It offers hope and optimism that mankind, will overcome the current uncertainties and emerge stronger and better, as it has always done in the past. Sales will continue flourish with sales professionals adding value to Customers in ways that technology alone may not be able to

You can read the full length article [here](#)

"I was the sum of all the obstacles I had to overcome."

- David Goggins

## Spotlight

Shining a light on a whole new set of cognitive skills needed by sales

### Cognitive Skills in Sales for Anticipatory Thinking

#### Cognitive Skills for Sales Professionals

The word 'Cognitive' is defined to mean "being, or involving conscious intellectual activity" This covers activities like thinking, reasoning, or remembering. So, cognitive skills are a set of mental abilities. They are brain-based skills required for everything we do in a day, from simple routine tasks to complex work. With waves of technology and artificial intelligence transforming every profession, the sales function has become more cerebral and demanding than ever before. Specific and higher-level cognitive skills are needed to be successful in sales of the future



### Why should sales professionals build their repertoire of Cognitive Skills?

Sales as we have known it is changing dramatically. The common perception that sales is mostly about relationships, people, a little knowledge and great communication may not be valid any longer. The role of the salesperson is undergoing radical changes:

Sales professionals now need to be increasingly capable of:

1. Sharper and better thinking
2. Offering insights and not just information to Customers
3. Becoming reliable advisers who can help Customers anticipate and make informed choices better
4. Understanding, using, communicating, and interpreting data
5. Solving problems, analysing issues, visualizing & anticipating possibilities, discussing insights, using logic and emotions together to build and communicate value

### 10 Essential Cognitive Skills for Sales

While research enumerates 22 cognitive skills for becoming future ready, 10 of them are essential skills that sales professionals would benefit by mastering on priority. Below is a listing:

I Analysis oriented skills – (1) Data Orientation & Data Affinity (2) Analytical thinking for innovation (3) Ability to identify opportunities

II Action oriented skills – (4) Organizing Knowledge (5) Problem Solving (6) Bias for action and execution (7) Technology use, monitoring and control

III Mindset oriented skills – (8) Digital Intelligence (9) Passion driven curiosity (10) Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility

These skills can be eminently learnable. We need to keep our focus on What they are, How they make a difference, How to learn them in a good way, How to use them, How to make them part of us in a more effective way. The Sept 2024 issue of Mercuri Mail turned the spotlight on 3 of these skills viz., Passion Driven Curiosity, Ability to Identify Opportunities and Data Affinity and Data Orientation. This issue highlights 3 more of them – (1) Problem Solving (2) Digital Intelligence and (3) Analytical Thinking for Innovation

Year 2026 demands that we adopt Anticipatory Thinking which is the ability to foresee future problems, opportunities, risks, mitigants and outcomes. While bots and AI agents can make suggestions to buyers based on pattern spotting algorithms, it will always take a seasoned sales professional to add genuine value by supporting Customers in making choices that best suit their needs. Sales professionals with superior cognitive skills can anticipate multiple scenarios, spot the invisible pain points and uncover opportunities that Customers may not themselves recognise

Cognitive skills can foster anticipatory thinking not only in crafting a value based approach to Customers and markets but also equip salespeople to become way more effective in prospecting, pitching, negotiation and closing deals

“If you anticipate the coming of troubles, you take away their power when they arrive.”

- Seneca

## Spotlight Problem Solving

Because sales at its core, is all about solving problems

### 3 Reasons why Problem-Solving Skill is Essential for Sales Excellence

Problem solving is a critical cognitive skill that every salesperson must have in his arsenal. The reasons are not hard to spot. Here are 3 important reasons why:

Products are invented to solve problems, selling is a problem-solving activity

People don't buy products or services, they buy solutions which solve their stated and unstated problems. Harvard Prof Clayton Christensen postulated that Customers actually 'hire' a product to 'get a job to be done'

Every salesperson has 'many business-related problems' to solve – constantly



Some typical and recurrent problems include issues like:

1. Sales are not increasing at the pace needed
2. Not able to achieve targets
3. Distributor is not buying
4. Market share is dropping
5. Sales promotion is not working
6. Stake holder is 'biased' for competition

The list is endless

So, what is problem solving in a sales context?

To put it simply we solve a problem every time we do something without having prior knowledge of how to do it. The number and complexity of problems in sales and business are more than ever before.

There are 2 parts to solving a business or sales problem – (i) Define the right problem (ii) Solve that problem

A peek into problem solving tools and strategies

3 commonly used approaches to problem definition are:

- 1) Reframing the problem
- 2) Restating the problem
- 3) Create a problem statement, keeping in mind the elements of a good problem statement

While there are close to 14 standard problem-solving techniques, the following 4 are recurrently used in solving sales problems:

Analogy (b) Brainstorming (c) Hypothesis testing (d) Root cause analysis

To quickly illustrate with one technique:

Analogy, for example, involves arriving at a solution from previous problem that was successfully solved. This involves carefully taking note of how problems get resolved so that you can anticipate and propose the same solution when a similar problem arises in future. This is a response that is frequently observed in sales champions.

For instance, let us say your company has been using an inhouse CRM software for the past 3 years. It interfaces with your sales MIS reporting system. Your Sales Head has asked for an additional data point on Customer referral to be captured. The CRM is unable to accommodate it and the concerned support team is not immediately reachable. But then you remember how a similar integration issue was resolved last year. So you are quick to use that experience to solve this problem.

Now suppose, a year later, you are on a Sales Call, with a Prospect who is evaluating options for buying a similar CRM system. You ask for the specification sheet, and notice that it doesn't specify if additional fields can be added. You recall your last year experience with your Prospect, and ask 'what if you want to add more fields? Don't you think it will be a good idea to include that requirement in your spec sheet?' Your Prospect thankfully appreciates you for the anticipatory thinking!

So, Problem Solving is a valuable cognitive skill for sales professionals. It is in fact a life skill because a well lived life can be described a series of problems not just intelligently solved but also anticipated well in advance to help you stay prepared. As Theodore Isaac Rubin summed it up humorously "The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem"

"When a problem comes along, study it until you are completely knowledgeable. Then find that weak spot, break the problem apart, and the rest will be easy.."

- Norman Vincent Peale

## Spotlight Digital Intelligence

Because digital defines the way we live, work, buy and sell

### What is and what is not Digital Intelligence

Digital Intelligence isn't just the capability and ease in using digital technologies. It is a Cognitive skill that involves an ability to frame everything that we do in the context of data, devices and technology to collaborate and manage change and to expand possibilities and potential.

It encompasses a set of attitudes and behaviours that enable people and organizations to foresee possibilities.

### Why do Salespeople need Digital Intelligence

With the share of digital and AI mediated selling rising across all formats including B2C and B2B, Digital Intelligence has become a critical cognitive skill for sales professionals to master. Digital is not so much about technology that is used. It is more about using technology to position people, especially Customers, at the center of all that we do



Here are 4 reasons why today's sales professionals cannot do without digital intelligence:

No matter which industry you serve, technology is continually reshaping it.

With digital intelligence you are open to opportunities offered by new tools and technologies

Digital intelligence equips you with the ability to draw insights from digitally generated data to create Customer value

You can act on digital opportunities to improve processes and ensure a superior Customer experience

#### Example of Digital Intelligence applied with Anticipatory thinking

Before a Sales Call, you research online for latest developments and challenges in the Prospect's industry, and also about how the Prospect's peers from the same and other related industries and geographies have responded in such situations.

You prepare for prevention of business disruption or unexpected Customer demands. You routinely back up all information shared by your Customer with care and diligence. Your Customer goes through a data corruption, and you are there waiting to help!

#### What does Digital Intelligence mean

Cultivating Digital intelligence as a cognitive skill involves having a foundational awareness of the impact that current and emerging digital technologies have on sales and the sales organisation

It encompasses things like:

Cybersecurity,

Predictive analytics,

AI

Social media,

Online collaboration

Work-from-home technologies

Benefits of Digital Intelligence

Research published by MIT Sloan Management Review lists out the following organisational level benefits of skilling people in Digital Intelligence:

Nimbleness: The ability to quickly pivot and move. ("We used to do this, and now we do that.")

Scalability: The ability to rapidly shift capacity and service levels. ("We used to serve x customers; we now serve 100x customers.")

Stability: The ability to maintain operational excellence under pressure. ("We will persist despite the challenges.")

Optionality: The ability to anticipate future scenarios, and build or acquire new capabilities through external collaboration. ("Our ecosystem of partners allows us to do things we couldn't do previously do.")

What does really take

Tsedal Neeley and Paul Leonardi, writing for HBR, offer encouragement when they advise - "You don't have to be a machine learning expert to manage a successful digital transformation. In fact, you only need 30 percent fluency in a handful of technical topics" So, what's stopping us from becoming Digitally Intelligent?

Learning skills is not always about finding the right method for you. It's often about finding the right method for the task.

- Adam Grant

## Spotlight Analytical Thinking for Innovation

Because structure and analysis spur innovation

**Analytical Thinking Actually Spurs Innovation** Digital “Wait, isn’t that skill itself a contradiction, an oxymoron?”

Innovation by definition is the process of bringing to life new ideas, methods, products, services or solutions that create significant positive impact and value. And for innovation to happen there must be unconstrained, free flow thinking. Where does analytical thought come into this?

While that’s true, we shouldn’t forget that innovation must always be a workable idea. For this, it has to pass a three-attribute test. According to business strategy textbooks, for an idea to be accepted as an innovation, it must be:

- Novel
- Useful
- Successfully implementable



It is sound analysis that helps conversion of ideas into concrete proposals or prototypes which can then be implemented. Brilliant ideas are of no value if they are not commercially implementable. As Peter Drucker reminds us – “Ideas are cheap and abundant; what is of value is the effective placement of those ideas into situations that develop into action” This is where an analytical thinking becomes valuable

Free thinking without an analytical framework, we face the “curse of the blank page,” not knowing where to start. Or we suffer the “Einstellung effect.” This cognitive bias results in familiar being solutions recalled first, blocking all new thinking.



Structure and analysis, interestingly, spur innovation. They don’t stifle it. Surprising truth is that a lot of ingenious thinking comes from structure. Says MIT Professor Steven Eppinger: “You just have to get comfortable overlaying a little structure, a little process, over your creative activities.”

### How Analytical Thinking helps Innovation in Sales

Thinking analytically can be especially useful in innovating new approaches to markets, Customers and transactions in sales. Analysing data often yields insights that can help us become innovative in creating solutions for Customers.

Research by Harvard Business School found that constraints promote analytical thinking leading to better innovations in 3 ways:

1. Constraints force a need for analysis
2. Analytical thinking brings structure to innovation
3. Analysis draws up contours within which workable innovation can flourish

## Two Analytical Thinking Tools for Innovation

- Data Powered Innovation
- Bounded Innovation & Relative Importance Testing

Analysing data can reveal trends, patterns and stories. And when such analysis is undertaken after defining boundaries, it can speed up innovation within the bounded space. This prevents wastage of time and enables quicker implementation of innovative ideas and strategies

## Example of Analytical thinking for Innovation exercised with an Anticipatory mindset

Descriptive and predictive analysis of data can show up outliers among Customers and territories. This in turn facilitates anticipation of purchase trends, creating scope for innovation. Seasonal variations picked up by data analysis help anticipate ebbs and spates in demand that can be leveraged through innovative sales campaigns. Similarly micro trends buried in aggregate numbers also carry seeds for innovation provided they are spotted through analysis and anticipation. Imagine being able to help your Prospects make better sense of the data they are working with, to anticipate possibilities they may not have recognised yet! That's value creation through anticipation!

Author Stephen M Shapiro calls the use of analytical thinking to innovate as the "left brained approach to innovation" And that can be a perfect recipe for using innovation to power sales activity!

"Think of digital transformation less as a technology project to be finished than as a state of perpetual agility, always ready to evolve for whatever customers want next, and you'll be pointed down the right path."

- Amit Zavery

## Must Read

Edited Short Excerpts, Extracts and annotations on insightful

### Get Better at Anything by Scott H Young

Get Better at Anything, published in 2024, outlines 12 maxims for mastering any skill. The book lists three factors as most important in ensuring effective learning of any skill:

1. Observing others (for modelling)
2. Extensive practice (for gaining prowess)
3. Reliable feedback (from trustworthy sources)

The book draws on research and anecdotal stories from real lives. Anyone aspiring to learn something new or mastering an already acquired skill would benefit from the range of learning and skill perfection strategies outlined in the book

The author Scott H Young is an entrepreneur and podcaster, widely acknowledged for his deeply researched understanding of skill building methods that work. He is known to be a self-education expert after his successful "MIT Challenge" that he took on by learning MIT's Computer Science Curriculum all by himself in a year that led to his writing the best seller book "Ultralearning"

Here is an extract from the "Get Better at Anything" on Practice Loops



## Creating a Practice Loop

“Desirable difficulties suggest a tension between seeing and doing in our practice. Without the opportunity to see a pattern for solving a problem, we have to invent it for ourselves. In the best case, this can involve added cognitive load. In the worst case, we may never learn the helpful strategy.

Conversely, if we always have easy access to helpful hints, we may not internalize the lessons. One way to resolve this tension is to combine the three components of seeing an example, solving a problem, and getting feedback into a practice loop. By repeatedly cycling through the loop, we ensure that all three ingredients of successful learning are available to us. Octavia Butler (Science fiction author) applied a similar process when advising new writers. “For instance, if they have difficulty with beginnings—they have wonderful stories to tell but don’t know where to begin or how to begin—I have them look at work they enjoy reading. . . . I then ask them to copy half a dozen beginnings; I ask them to copy directly, word for word.”

Butler explains her strategy, “This is not about imitating someone else’s beginnings; that’s why I want at least a half a dozen. It’s about learning what is possible. One of the problems we have as writers is that we either know too much or not enough. . . . We know that there is an ocean of possibilities out there, and we’re overwhelmed. We don’t know how to take from the ocean just what we need.”

By studying how other authors have solved similar problems, you can sample from a range of options when dealing with your own stories. Seeing examples is the first step in building new skills.

Next, you need to actually perform the skill you’re trying to practice. Seeing can assist with doing, but it can never replace it. To learn a skill, we need to overcome the brain’s effort-saving tendencies that avoid internalizing knowledge we aren’t actively using. Action guides attention. Researchers have found that students tend not to study worked examples until they encounter a problem that requires using them. By cycling back and forth between examples and practice questions, you ensure you’re attending to the lessons and not just skimming them over.

Finally, we need to get accurate feedback on the quality of our attempt. This is a clear stumbling block for skills like writing. Butler struggled for years owing to a lack of high-quality feedback telling her what mistakes she was making in her work. When given the opportunity, Butler aggressively sought feedback on her work. During her classes at the Screen Writers’ Guild, she sought out feedback from one of the teachers, Sid Steeple. “Whatever you wrote he would go over it and talk to you about it and you might go home feeling like you didn’t much like him but it was the kind of criticism I needed,” Butler explained.

As you progress in a skill, the practice loop can be made more challenging. Seeing examples can fade away as you increasingly tackle problems using your internal reservoir of knowledge. The problems you choose can increase in complexity, as you can manage extra cognitive load from bigger projects. Finally, self-assessment can play an increasing role over external feedback as you develop refined intuitions as to what counts as excellent work. The practice loop creates an opportunity to optimize the level of difficulty”

This is a practice that could well apply to acquiring all sales skills, including cognitive skills that can cultivate anticipatory thinking

“Rules are not the fetters of genius. They are the fetters of men with no genius”

- Joshua Reynolds, Painter



"The hospital computer system has a virus.  
Irony, isn't it?"



"Remember our former product, 'The Resolution',  
that people only used on January 2nd of each year?"

"Being anticipatory is to help make better decisions today in relation to tomorrow's possible futures"

- Roger Spitz