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**"DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN BTOB MARKETS:  
AN INVESTIGATION ON THE ROLE OF  
CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT"**

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# Introduction

In recent years, the evolving digital environment has had a profound impact on businesses in terms of interacting with customers and nurturing relationships with them. As consumers increasingly turn to digital channels for information, communication, and transactional purposes, companies need to adapt and refine their strategies to meet these changing preferences and to stay competitive. In analysing the impact of the advent of digital technologies on customer relationships, the research will focus on Business-to-Business (BtoB) contexts. The primary motivation behind this choice is that, as stated by Gregori and Perna (2019), in the Italian economy the volume and value of exchanges between companies and other organisations, often exceed those of Business-to-Consumer (BtoC) markets by several times. There are far more companies that operate in BtoB markets than those targeting final customers such as individuals or families, with an estimation of two out of three companies involved in BtoB transactions (Gregori and Perna, 2019). Another significant motivation is related to technological development, since BtoB companies foster technological innovation and represent the main source of product and service innovation. The continuous innovation in the industrial system is the main driver of economic development, which derives from the interactions between customers and suppliers (Gregori and Perna, 2019).

However, independently of the type of the market, one important feature that can distinguish a company from a myriad of competitors is the ability to deliver efficient customer service, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems become key in doing this. CRM systems provide a centralised platform for collecting, organising, and analysing customer data, and thus enabling companies to deliver personalised and efficient interactions. This thesis investigates the role of CRM systems in managing customer relationships, also exploring the benefits and challenges of the adoption process.

Therefore, the starting point of this thesis is a literature review covering topics related to business models, BtoB marketing, digital transformation, and CRM systems. The main scholars' findings are reported in the first two chapters, as well as some key trends and figures to provide an overview of the evolving trajectory of digital evolution. Subsequently, the research focuses on the empirical investigation with a mixed methodology approach. The empirical investigation combines both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis consists of the diffusion of a survey, aiming at examining companies' perceptions and adoption of CRM systems, reaching a number of 80 respondents. The qualitative analysis involves an in-depth cross-case analysis with four different case studies investigating

advantages and challenges related to CRM systems use and implementation, as well as the influence of digital technologies on BtoB relationships. After presenting the findings, the last part of this research is intended to draw conclusions of the considered cases, defining some managerial implications and limitations of the study.

# **Chapter 1: New business models and BtoB marketing evolution**

## **1.1 New business models: digitalization and servitization in the BtoB context**

The business world's rapid digitalization is transforming industries, and many academics and practitioners are stressing the need to rethink the existing business models (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018). This transformation is mainly driven by the confluence of two emerging trends: digital transformation and servitization. For instance, digital transformation is pushing firms to leverage on services in order to create entirely new business models (Paiola, 2018). The persistent pace of technological innovation has altered the way businesses operate, interact with customers and create value. Companies are embracing a more interconnected and customer-centric approach. Simultaneously, the growing importance of servitization has brought a paradigm shift in how companies deliver value to customers. This shift has blurred the boundaries between products and services, challenging the traditional perception of business models.

The present section will investigate the relationships between digital transformation and servitization and their implications on contemporary business models, focusing on how the two trends intersect and reinforce one another.

### **1.1.1 The impact of digital transformation and servitization on business models**

Business models have been defined in the literature in different ways, but Osterwalder (2005) gave a broad definition that is: “a Business Model is a conceptual tool containing a set of objects, concepts, and their relationships with the objective to express the business logic of a specific firm. Therefore, we must consider which concepts and relationships allow a simplified description and representation of what value is provided to customers, how this is done and with which financial consequences”. With different words, Zott and Amit (2017) refers to the business model as “a system of interconnected and interdependent activities that determines the way the company does business with its stakeholders”.

As anticipated before, the new industrial paradigm is transforming the current ways of value creation, providing more cooperative environments, improved customer relationships or new product and services offers. In particular, two recent trends and phenomena are emerging and challenging business models: Industry 4.0 and Servitization.

In order to successfully initiate a digitalization or servitization strategy, businesses need to change their strategies, operations, and value chain. In other words, they must implement changes into their business models (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2018). As a consequence, new and adapted business models become essential (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

As a result of the growing usage of digital technologies, digitalization has influence on every industry, as it impacts corporate strategies, and challenges existing business models to be redesigned and adapted (Rachinger *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, several scholars have stressed that this technology-push innovation results in a radical business model innovation of manufacturing companies (Frank *et al.*, 2019).

In particular, Ibarra *et al.* (2018) define the main features of Industry 4.0 that have a major impact on the evolution of business models. In addition, the main issues deriving from these features and the requirements needed to face the challenges posed by digital transformation, are presented in Figure 1.1. For instance, interoperability, which can be defined as the connection and communication between human beings and smart factories, allows to reduce both the internal and external barriers promoting a more networked environment. Consequently, standardisation of systems, platforms and interactions become fundamental.

Main Features of the Industry 4.0	Main issues affecting traditional Business Model	Main requirements to face digital transformation
Interoperability	Networking and reduction of barriers	Standardization
Virtualization	Flexibility and personalization	Work organization
Decentralization of decision making	Individualized mass production	Availability of products
Real-time capability	Local production	New Business Models
Service orientation	Low price	Know-how protections
Modularity	Smart goods and services	Availability of skilled workers
	Fragmentation of the value chain	Research investment
	Globalization and decentralization of production	Professional development
	V-H integrated production systems	Legal frameworks

Figure 1.1: Features, challenges, and requirements related to Industry 4.0 (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018)

Based on the previous results, three different approaches are suggested by Ibarra *et al.*, (2018) to respond to the above-mentioned issues and requirements, and to make firms get closer to Industry 4.0.

Table 1.1: Three different approaches to embrace Industry 4.0 - own elaboration.

<b>Approaches for firms to embrace Industry 4.0</b>
> Service-oriented approach
> Network-oriented approach
> User-driven approach

These approaches are described as follows.

1. *Service-oriented* approach. It derives from the need to rethink the optimal mix between product and service business, given that the digital part of a hybrid solution is always represented by a service. In other words, Industry 4.0 is pushing firms to a change from product to service mindset. Lot of researchers suggest manufacturing firms to expand their role in the value chain, by widening their product offering with services. In this way, manufacturers do not have to compete exclusively on manufacturing costs. The consequence is the integrated development, realisation and offering of specific product-service bundles as a solution for the customer, namely the product-service system (PSS) concept (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).
2. *Network-oriented* approach. Firms' traditional boundaries are expanding due to the horizontal and vertical integration of the value chain and the related interoperability. As a consequence, new actors arise and the roles of existing ones are changing and it results in new ways of creating value through a new ecosystem that goes beyond individual value chains (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).
3. *User-driven* approach. According to this approach, companies need to develop new capabilities to learn more about their customers, by collecting more information through digital technologies and by promoting evidence-based decision making. Industry 4.0 allows companies to create new and more flexible value propositions to respond to customers' demands (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

Differently, according to Zott and Amit (2017), the three design components of a business model are: content, structure, and governance. Changing one or more of these elements is equivalent to changing the entire business model. The implementation of a business model that is new to the firm can be defined as Business Model Innovation (or BMI), as defined by J. Björkdahl and M. Holmén (2013).

Business model innovation can occur in different ways, according to the level of innovation applied (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018, Rachinger *et al.*, 2018). Different frameworks have been developed. For instance, Ibarra *et al.* (2018) identifies four ways to conduct the digital transformation in manufacturing businesses, according to the degree of innovation, that goes from modifying few components of the previous business model through incremental innovation, to the transformation of all the elements of the business model as a result of a radical innovation. The four different alternatives are presented in Figure 1.2 below.

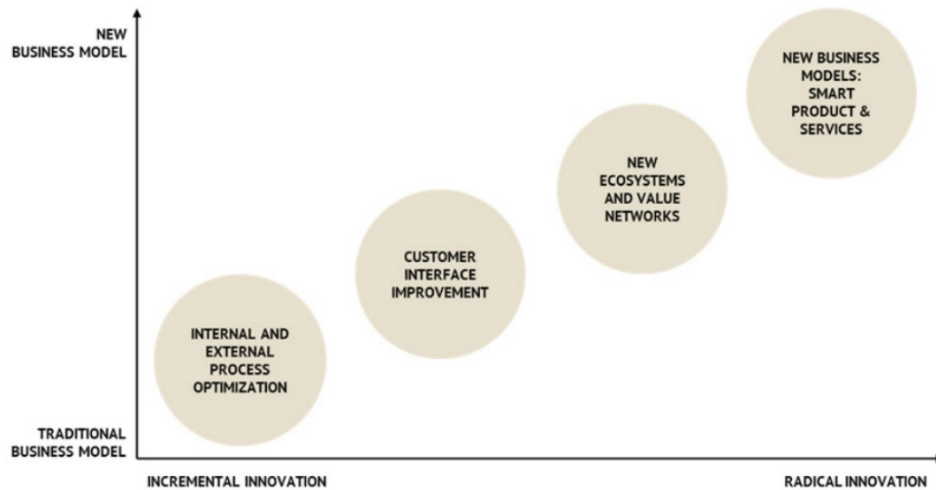


Figure 1.2: Four ways to conduct digital transformation in manufacturing companies (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018)

### 1. *Internal and external process optimization*

This transformation allows the optimization of the actual business without involving significant changes, thus representing an incremental innovation. The introduction of new digital technologies, such as Big Data, Cloud Computing, Additive Manufacturing, is motivated only to optimise the value creation thanks to increases in efficiency and improvements in performance. This could represent the first step for manufacturing companies to approach Industry 4.0 without involving high risks (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

### 2. *Customer interface improvement*

This incremental innovation focuses on value delivery improvements and allows the creation of new ways of interactions through new customer touchpoints, thanks to the introduction of digital technologies. In this way, a better understanding of customers' needs and desires is achieved, and a greater customer experience is delivered (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

### 3. *New ecosystems and value networks*

This approach leads to a radical innovation of the actual business model by focusing on the core business involving other actors and agents. By sharing the uncertainty of the core business with other agents, and by acquiring new skills and resources from partners, the firm's value creation process is linked with stakeholders' processes. As a result, companies move from individual value chains to ecosystems, and this requires a radical change of the business model (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

### 4. *New business models: smart products and services*

In contrast to the previous cases, this transformation proposes a completely new business model. The introduction of new technologies allows the offering of innovative and smart products and services. This represents a disruptive innovation that enables the change of almost all elements of the business model.

As discussed before with the service-oriented approach, the achievement of greater customer satisfaction involves a shift toward the provision of integrated solutions, thus moving into a service mindset. This change resulted in the servitization strategy of product firms, which refers to the evolution journey of product-centred firms towards PSS (Frank *et al.*, 2019). In more simplified terms, the process of increasing value by adding services to products can be defined as *servitization* (Vandermerwe and Rada, 1988). Servitization led to a transformational change from a product-centric to a service-centric business model and logic (Wirtz *et al.*, 2022).

One significant challenge related to services is that they are complex, intangible, and not clearly defined, resulting in difficulties for customers in distinguishing between different offerings (Wirtz *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, services are difficult to position, differentiate, and sell (Wirtz *et al.*, 2021). Grönroos (2020) suggests that services should be considered as concrete objects instead of intangible ones, and they need to be treated and marketed as tangible products. An effective approach with the aim to develop more concrete and tangible service products is the productization of services, which can be defined as “the process of transforming variable, ad-hoc services and service products into concrete, well-defined service products that are specified, branded, and priced so that they address a specific customer need” (Wirtz *et al.*, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of service product embedded in the previous definition can be expressed as a market offering that is structurally different from the physical product, since it is based on a performance that is experienced rather than owned. Even if the service product is supported by physical elements, the most significant portion of the value is embedded in the service (Wirtz *et al.*, 2021).

Three different characteristics that make the service products well-defined are identified and explained by Wirtz *et al.*, (2020), which are: specified, branded, and priced.

Specified refers to the fact that the service product has a defined value proposition, and consequently, specified service characteristics. The customer is able to understand what is to be done for the customer and how this is to be achieved. This specification is achieved by understanding, defining, and formalising the value proposition.

Second, well-defined service products are branded, meaning that they have a name, term, symbol or design and are extremely identifiable and distinctively perceived by these visual and linguistic elements. In other words, service branding allows the creation and maintenance of the customer's overall mental representation which facilitates the association with a service. By adding tangible features to service products (such as brochures, displays, etc.) it is possible to promote tangibilization.

Lastly, well-defined service products are priced. It means that service products have clearly stated, committed, and communicated prices, rather than being negotiated or determined for each transaction.

Servitization and digitalization have a joint and mutual effect on the transformation of business models (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, servitization and digitalization together have a big potential in improving firms' performance and profitability (Schroeder *et al.*, 2016). In particular, servitization has a positive impact on a firm's performance, as suggested by the literature (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, studies highlight three effects of servitization on companies' performance. First, in industries characterised by a high-installed product base there is a higher profit growth potential from introducing services (Gebauer *et al.*, 2006). Second, services represent a more stable source of revenue that can oppose the fall in profits from products, since services are more resistant to economic cycles (Gebauer *et al.*, 2017). Third, services are less sensible to price competition and can therefore give rise to higher rates of profits than pure product offerings (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, Martín-Peña *et al.* (2018) studied the relationship between servitization and digitalization, and their respective impact on firms' performance. In this regard, according to them, digitalization can be considered as both a driver and an enabler of servitization. As a driver, technology can stimulate changes that would be otherwise impossible, facilitating the paradigm shift toward a service-oriented mindset. As an enabler, technology can be adopted as a tool to satisfy a specific need and to provide a PSS. The emerging trends of servitization and digitalization are converging, radically disrupting value chains and pushing firms to rethink

future revenues and profits. Moreover, servitization promotes other benefits and advantages in terms of differentiation and by locking customers in (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2018).

## **1.2 BtoB marketing evolution**

For a long time, marketing communication has been considered as an essential activity performed by companies in order to inform, attract, and persuade customers. However, the recent shift from transactional to relational orientation has also changed marketing goals to inform, listen, and respond (Rėklaitis *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, depending on the type of customers a company deals with, marketing strategies hold their own peculiarities (Rėklaitis *et al.*, 2019). In fact, marketing in the BtoC context is based more on emotional aspects, while in the BtoB sector a higher level of professionalism is needed, but in any case, marketing leads to an interaction between the company and its customers (Rėklaitis *et al.*, 2019). In addition, sales in the BtoB sector are typically characterised by higher order values, longer sales cycles and are often more complex than BtoC sales (Rėklaitis *et al.*, 2019). Another important aspect representing a difference in the BtoB context is that in BtoB sales there will be more than one person to decide, therefore knowing decision makers and the decision process is very important (Rėklaitis *et al.*, 2019).

The BtoB marketing landscape has witnessed a significant transformation over recent years, influenced by a convergence of factors, such as technological advancements, changing customer behaviour, and the increasing complexity of business relationships.

The present section will explore key aspects of BtoB marketing evolution, focusing on the contemporary marketing strategies and on the concepts of value co-creation and customer experience, guiding principles for modern BtoB interactions. Given the high variety of channels involved in the digital environment, the omnichannel approach is also introduced.

### **1.2.1 The evolution of BtoB marketing: contemporary strategies**

Companies are aware of the need to connect with customers beyond the mere product or price, consequently BtoB marketing strategies have changed from the past (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). According to scholars, this represents an evolution, exactly as when companies started to focus on customers' needs instead of just focusing on selling the product. Chowdhury *et al.*, (2023) derives from the literature four marketing strategies that are key during contemporary times, which are: relationship marketing, sustainability marketing, digital marketing, and innovation marketing.

### *Relationship marketing*

The concept of relationship marketing began to become popular in the 1980s, when the establishment of strong relationships started to be considered as essential for the creation and sustenance of competitive advantage (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). The theoretical foundations of relationship marketing can be traced back to services marketing, in which the concepts of customer primacy and interactivity are crucial (Grönroos, 2004). Relationship marketing has been defined by Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 22) as “all activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchange”. Relationship marketing has benefits for both customers and firms. From the customer perspective, benefits include: trust in the company, sharing of values with the partner, and customization. All these elements contribute to a higher level of customer’s satisfaction (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). From the company’s point of view, it is possible to mention benefits such as: decrease in uncertainty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), increase in customer satisfaction (Abdul-Muhmin, 2002), higher loyalty (Verhoef, 2003), and superior financial performance (Boles *et al.*, 2000). Again, all these elements contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of the firm. Moreover, the literature suggests that BtoB relationships are capable of increasing the competitive advantage, reducing transaction costs through collaboration, decreasing opportunism and increasing efficiency and effectiveness through resource integration (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023).

### *Sustainability marketing*

Growing consumer awareness of sustainability and desires to purchase sustainable products has shown to companies that the increasing recognition of sustainability can raise a competitive advantage (Hyun Min *et al.*, 2021, Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). Consumers who are interested about sustainability issues are more likely to purchase sustainable products or services. Consequently, companies can use sustainability as a leverage when developing effective marketing strategies. Companies are still learning to embrace sustainability as a core part of their strategies, but there is an inclination to positive brand image and customer relationships, as a result of investments in environmental sustainability (Vesal *et al.* 2021).

### *Digital marketing*

Previously digital marketing was considered useful only for BtoC organisations, however nowadays it has become essential also for BtoB ones. BtoB organisations realised that digital marketing in the BtoB context can enhance trust and improve the information flow among customers (Pandey *et al.*, 2020). Thanks to digital media, BtoB customers can now have easy access to information about various products and services, an opportunity not traditionally

present. It is essential that BtoB companies maintain an active online presence through websites, blogs, online business communities, or social media platforms (Pandey and Shinde, 2019). Several research studies show that digital marketing promotes better marketing communication, efficient online sales, lower search costs, easy price comparison, spreading user reviews, and brand differentiation (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). All these elements together contribute to a better customer relationship management.

### *Innovation marketing*

According to Chowdhury *et al.*, (2023) innovation can be defined as a performance-maximising strategy with focus on technology and as a cost-minimising strategy by engaging in process technology innovation to decrease total costs of production. In other words, innovation can be pursued by both offering innovation in the product itself, or by involving in innovation of processes to make the company more competitive.

### **1.2.2 Omnichannel in the BtoB context**

BtoB customer interactions increasingly occur in digital spaces, and companies must adopt new technological solutions and tools in order to create satisfactory customer journeys (Zolkiewski *et al.*, 2017). In this regard, digital interactions have emerged as a dominant exchange mode for businesses and customers (Steinhoff *et al.*, 2019). However, digital channels are not used independently, rather they complement interpersonal interactions; meaning that digital channels and traditional interpersonal channels are seen as integrated (Heinonen, 2010). Digital and interpersonal exchanges support and enhance each other, and both are needed to maintain and develop a successful customer relationship (Heinonen, 2010).

The variety of channels and touchpoints significantly increased with the digital era, as well as customers' movements across them. Consequently, companies must integrate marketing and sales operations in order to offer a coherent customer experience across all channels (Rustholllkarhu *et al.*, 2022). Digital channels can be classified in several different ways. According to Taiminen *et al.*, (2015), one method to classify channels is to divide them based on two dimensions: which party controls mainly the communications (company or target audience), and whether the communication develops in one-way or two-way. The presented classification is shown in Figure 1.3.

	<b>High company control</b>	<b>Low company control</b>
<b>One-way</b>	Website Email newsletters Online directories Banner adverting	SEO (Search engine optimization) SEA (Search engine advertising)
<b>Two-way</b>	Company generated blogs Company's own communities	Social Media

Figure 1.3: Classification of digital channels (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015)

Among the one-way communication channels, websites and email can be defined as online tools with high company control. A company's website represents the first tool to inform the public about the company's online presence and recent activity and increase its recognition. Emails are useful for several marketing purposes, which include sharing information, promotion, building and maintaining relationships, and guiding customers to websites (Simmons, 2007). Even if email can be considered as a two-way communication channel, it is often exploited as a one-way channel to deliver newsletter and advertisements (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). Also, online directories, listings that can be bought by companies for a specific period, and online advertising can be included in digital mediums with one-way communication and high company control (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) can be defined as the process of improving the websites' rank of results in search engines, and together with Search Engine Advertising (SEA), can be classified as one-way communication channels with low company control (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). SEA refers to paid advertisements on a search engine's results page, both SEO and SEA are essential for an online company's visibility. On the other side, the authors identified two-way communication channels, fostered by the increasing use of social media, which require two-way interactions instead of monologues from the company (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). Given the nature of social media, companies have less control on this type of channel. Moreover, in these environments customers expect to receive real information generated through conversations and interactions, since social media are characterised as interactive and participative (Gomez *et al.*, 2019). Social media has thus become an important source of marketing communication and branding, as well as an important channel for customer engagement (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). Moving on two-way communication channels with high company control, blogging is a tool that seems to be effective in order to create good relationships, and for these reasons many companies are adopting blogging as part of their communication strategy (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). In general, the literature highlights that interactivity within the internet seems to have a positive influence on a company's online performance, in particular by increasing customer's attention, by developing stronger relationships, and thereby increasing overall satisfaction (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015).

As seen above, there is a high variety of digital channels and a need for coherence led to the emergence of the concept of omnichannel marketing, which has been defined by Accenture as a synchronised operating model in which “all of a customer’s channels and touchpoints are aligned, presenting a single front to the customer and a single, distinct manner of conducting business” (Carrol and Guzmàn, 2015). The goal of omnichannel marketing is to present consistent and penetrating communication in multiple channels simultaneously. As a result, it requires the definition of a brand communication strategy, which will be translated in all channels in which the BtoB seller is active (Hayes *et al.*, 2022). As customers expect a consistent and coherent experience in every stage of their journey across different channels, companies are expected to provide omnichannel strategies that can meet customers’ needs (Forrester, 2015).

### **1.2.3 Relationship with customers and their relevance for products and services in BtoB: customer experience and value co-creation**

In order to maintain an adequate level of customer satisfaction and fulfil customers’ needs, companies must be aware of emerging themes and trends that can influence their relationship with customers. For instance, two of these emerging themes are: the increasing importance of customer experience, and the concept of value co-creation. Companies must consider the evolution of what customers value the most and adapt accordingly.

#### *Emerging importance of customer experience and customer journey*

Given the shift from transactional marketing in favour of relationship marketing, nowadays customers evaluate suppliers taking into account the total experience, rather than judging single transactions (Ulaga, 2018). Transactional exchanges refer to single, short-term exchange events that are completed with the receipt and payment of the product or service (Witell *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, relational exchanges involve interactions linked together over time and represent a continuous process characterised by a succession of exchange events.

In order to create unique and valuable experiences, businesses need to focus on the customer journey, which can be defined as the process a customer goes through, composed of multiple touchpoints and stages that make up the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). On the other hand, customer experience is defined as “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings and actions” (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). Therefore, customer journeys and customer experiences are gaining increasing importance and represent a way for companies to

achieve a strong competitive advantage (Edelman and Singer, 2015). This is the reason why companies are increasingly interested in Customer Experience Management (CEM). Moreover, nowadays customer journeys tend to be long, complex, and technical, and involve constant interactions among the different touchpoints (Laurensy, 2019).

Traditionally, BtoB markets are seen to be characterised by rational and economic-based decision making (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013). According to Witell *et al.*, (2019) employees' experiences, during the interaction with other employees, physical equipment, software, and services, are likely to include emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social components (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, in contrast with the traditional thought, Witell *et al.* (2019), claim that experiences of business customers can be reconducted to customer experiences in BtoC contexts. Although, BtoB customer experiences cannot be measured in the same way as in the BtoC context (Zolkiewski *et al.*, 2017), and the focus in BtoB environments is on understanding the value in use (Eggert *et al.*, 2018).

Even if CEM can provide several benefits to both customers and companies, five key challenges are identified and explained by Witell *et al.* (2019). In particular, two challenges are related to relationship expectations (mismatches in customer relationships and siloed customer experiences), two to actor interactions (mismatches across the customer's journey and lack of touchpoint control) and the last one to the dynamics of the customer experience.

1. *Mismatches in customer relationships* can happen with regard to the state of relationship (relational or transactional) or divergences about what makes up an excellent customer experience. For instance, a customer might want a transactional exchange, while the supplier desires a more relational business exchange. The supplier should be able to differentiate customers according to their value and relational orientations, to avoid the development of unprofitable customer relationships. For the same reason, parties should agree on an appropriate level of customer experience (Witell *et al.* 2019).
2. *Siloed customer experience* can occur since in BtoB contexts customer relationships include multiple contacts at different levels and across multiple touchpoints. Therefore, customer experience is affected by varying expectations and perceptions between different individuals and organisational units. In other words, the customer experience provided by a supplier can be evaluated differently among the different business units that compose the customer firm (Witell *et al.* 2019).

3. *Mismatches across the customer journey* can appear due to the involvement of a diversity of actors and to multiple journeys taking place concurrently. The customer journey is composed of different stages and each stage is characterised by a specific level of involvement of actors and by specific factors that influence customer experience and expectations. For example, negotiation stages involve buyers, senior management and board members, whose experiences and expectations are affected by the availability of decision-making information. In contrast, the operations stage involves end users whose experiences and expectations are evaluated on the quality and utility of the purchased product or service, as well as on interactions with the supplier's service staff (Witell *et al.* 2019).
4. *Lack of touchpoint control* due to the presence of dealers, service partners or other intermediaries, can represent a challenge because, since the supplier does not come into direct contact with the customer, there is a need to understand how best to monitor the quality of experiences. In fact, touchpoints can be controlled by actors different from the supplier since the supplier could have decided to task third parties to provide services to the customer (Witell *et al.* 2019).
5. *Dynamics of the customer experience* is something that companies must take into account, since touchpoints control and design can change during the relationship's duration. With different words, single touchpoints need to be modified and developed continuously due to contextual issues or changes in expectations (Witell *et al.* 2019).

#### *Emerging importance of value co-creation*

Another emerging theme that affects products and services companies is the theme of value co-creation. The additional prefix "co" is related to the shared activity among actors with dyadic relationships, multilateral networks, and ecosystems (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). The concept of co-creation derives mainly from the service-dominant logic (SDL), according to which the economic exchange is shifting from goods provision to service provision (Bonamigo *et al.*, 2022). In other words, this means that companies should focus on delivering services instead of producing products. According to SDL, value is always co-created, and in order for suppliers to provide it, they need to promote forms of collaboration with their customers (Bonamigo *et al.*, 2022). This is because not all businesses are self-sufficient in innovation capability and knowledge, therefore they need to involve themselves in partnerships that complement them. These collaborations with business partners allow companies to co-create value through the sharing of knowledge (Bonamigo *et al.*, 2022).

During the process of co-creation firms share and co-create knowledge with their partners, but knowledge sharing beyond organisations' boundaries could represent a risk and lead to opportunistic behaviour and knowledge loss (Schwetschke *et al.*, 2018). The exposition of knowledge to other firms creates a contradiction between sharing and protecting knowledge named *the boundary paradox* or the *paradox of openness* (Oinonen *et al.*, 2018; Foege *et al.*, 2019). To overcome this dilemma, companies have two different alternatives: protect their knowledge with legal tools, such as contracts, or trust their partners.

As said before, value co-creation is a process in which businesses share services and resources with stakeholders in order to obtain mutual benefits (Oinonen *et al.*, 2018; Schwetschke *et al.*, 2018). This process includes two different components: co-production and co-creation (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). First, co-production refers to activities carried out jointly by the supplier and its customer that create an offering. In other words, the customer takes part in the process of co-producing a supplier's value proposition, meaning a service, product, or solution. On the other hand, co-creation is linked to the concept of value-in-use and refers to the joint creation of the customer experience (Bonamigo *et al.*, 2020).

# **Chapter 2: Digital transformation in BtoB markets and its effect on Customer Relationship Management**

## **2.1 Digital transformation and main impacts on BtoB markets**

Digital technologies are gradually transforming BtoB markets and companies, which can take advantage of a wide range of digital systems that are able to completely or partially manage their interactions with the actors of their network and customers (Pagani and Pardo, 2017). The continuous integration of digital technologies into business processes has led to the concept of Industry 4.0, also known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Industry 4.0 and the underlying digital transformation are considered to provide BtoB companies with valuable advantages crucial for their future competitiveness and survival, such as manufacturing productivity, reduced operating costs, improved product quality and product innovation (Chen, 2019). Although technologies are stimulating companies with new opportunities, at the same time they are posing novel challenges.

The present section of the research will firstly investigate the two intertwined concepts of digital transformation and Industry 4.0 focusing both on the technological and human factor. Subsequently, a selection of statistics will shed light on the evolving trajectory of digital evolution, offering insights both at national and European level. Moving towards the domain of BtoB relationships, the characteristics of digital BtoB interactions will be explored, as well as consequences and influences of the advent of new technologies on relationships. Under the disruptive force of the digital Industrial Revolution companies are experiencing several benefits. However, a conscientious acknowledgement of challenges and risks that characterised this paradigm shift is imperative for companies. For this reason, the last part of the present section will be dedicated to challenges and opportunities that define the landscape of digital transformation.

### **2.1.1 Digital transformation and Industry 4.0: concepts and technologies**

The growing use of digital technologies can be referred to as *digitalization* (Martín-Peña *et al.*, 2019). This transformational process has been referred to in the literature as *digital transformation*, but numerous studies have highlighted a lack of a unified and overarching definition (Resego *et al.*, 2017; Cheng *et. al.*, 2017). According to Liu *et al.* (2011) digital transformation can be defined as “the integration of digital technologies into business

processes”. A different definition, according to Fitzgerald *et al.* (2013), is represented by “the use of digital technologies to enable major business improvements”.

Another interesting point of view is the one of Ebert and Duarte (2018), according to which companies reorganise themselves in order to simultaneously operate in two different ways: standard and disruptive mode. The standard mode focuses on keeping traditional businesses and operations running, whereas the disruptive mode actively seeks opportunities to innovate in technologies, processes, products, or services, and explore new markets. Therefore, value creation involves not only traditional methods, but also digitalization.

The explosive growth of information and communication technologies fostered by digital transformation, and their consequent integration into business processes, are the essence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, known as Industry 4.0 (Yaqub and Alsabban, 2023). As defined by Pereira and Romero (2017), Industry 4.0 consists of a variety of innovative technologies which has led to a dramatic revolution in businesses by enabling disruptive responses to the emerging challenges. Industry 4.0 can be described also as a new industrial maturity stage based on connectivity provided by new technologies that allow the interconnection and integration between companies’ products and services, in order to achieve higher value for both customers and companies (Grandinetti *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, it is possible to state that technologies have improved business connectivity, by facilitating the integration of business processes in a seamless way (Yaqub and Alsabban, 2023).

In regard to the technologies encompassed by Industry 4.0, the literature evidence is prolific (Tortorella *et al.*, 2022). Industry 4.0 relates to several technologies that are driving the digital transformation of firms (Ortt *et al.*, 2020).

According to Gibson *et al.*, (2014) it is possible to group Industry 4.0 technologies into: physical and digital technologies. Physical technologies include manufacturing technologies such as Additive Manufacturing and sensors, while digital technologies refer to modern information and communication technologies, such as Cloud Computing, Blockchain, and Big Data analytics.

Despite the growing attention from researchers and practitioners, a lack of unanimous definition for the technologies that build up Industry 4.0 remains (Rossini *et al.*, 2022). The literature frequently recognizes different technologies, which can be included in the portfolio of Industry 4.0 technologies. More in detail, the technologies frequently cited are: Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data and analytics, Cloud Computing, Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Additive Manufacturing, Augmented Reality, and Robotics. Table 2.1 summarises various Industry 4.0 technologies.

Table 2.1: Industry 4.0 technologies portfolio - own elaboration

Technologies	Definitions	References
Internet of Things (IoT)	IoT can be considered as a network of physical objects that contains technologies and software that enables them to communicate and interact intelligently internally or with their external environment over the Internet. IoT is an automated solution that highly supports automated manufacturing. It comprises collection, transfer, analytics, and storage of data. The collection of data occurs with the help of sensors incorporated in various devices. The data collected are then used for analytics and decision-making activities.	Bai, Chunguang, <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Javaid, Mohd, <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Almeida <i>et. al</i> , 2020.
Big Data and analytics (BD)	BD refers to the strategy of gathering and subsequently analysing large volumes of data. The collection of data occurs from systems and sensors. The significant importance of Big Data is justified by the information it can generate, supported by analytics.	Bai, Chunguang, <i>et al.</i> , 2020;
Cloud Computing (CC)	CC is a digital technology that allows network access to a shared pool of computing resources, and it involves the capacity to store data in an internet server provider which can be simply achieved through remote access. This technology provides faster innovation, flexible	Malik Mohammad <i>et al.</i> , 2018

	resources and facilitates integration and coordination of different devices even if physically distant.	
Artificial intelligence (AI)	AI represents a system that imitates human capabilities and intelligence by allowing machines to work and react as human beings.	Bai, Chunguang, <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Tortorella <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Blockchain	<i>Blockchain</i> is a database that allows the creation of a distributed and tamper-proof digital ledger of transactions in order to guarantee greater security.	Bai, Chunguang, <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Additive Manufacturing (AM)	AM is a manufacturing technology that enables the creation of three-dimensional (3D) objects by joining materials in successive layers. AM can support the achievement of great potential for mass-customization.	Zheng, Ting, <i>et al.</i> , 2021
Augmented Reality (AR)	AR is a technique that permits virtual objects to coexist and interact with the real-world environment.	Zheng, Ting, <i>et al.</i> , 2021
Robotics	Robotics is a branch of science thanks to which robots can replicate human actions and operate in a shared learning environment with humans.	Bai, Chunguang, <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Zheng, Ting, <i>et al.</i> , 2021

Once the two intertwined concepts of Industry 4.0 and digital transformation have been clarified, with the aim to explore the evolutionary process of digital transformation, a selection of statistics is proposed.

According to Deloitte (2022)<sup>2</sup> the Industry 4.0 market has grown ten times in the past decade. The market value has increased from US\$10.5 billion in 2011 to US\$103 billion in 2021. At the same time, the percentage spent on Information Technology (IT) by manufacturing companies has grown steadily from 5 percent in 2011 to 20 percent in 2021. The main drivers that enable this growth include benefits such as real-time monitoring, critical insights leading to efficiency improvement, development of new products, and predictive analytics to improve asset reliability. Despite its advantages, based on Deloitte's findings, some risks are associated with Industry 4.0 implementation, such as:

- *Perceived high cost and expensive maintenance.* Some organisations may be not interested in innovating existing assets due to high maintenance costs and investments.
- *Security and privacy of data.* Given the creation of huge amounts of data, Industry 4.0 also brings about potential risks around privacy and security of data.
- *Integration with existing assets.* It is a complex activity to integrate new digital technologies with already existing assets.
- *Hardware and software capabilities.* There is often a lack of technical expertise and digital skills in general in implementing and maintaining new digital systems.

The successful integration with Industry 4.0 is enhanced by a high degree of connectivity across the entire value chain and the digital ecosystem. The digital ecosystem encompasses a network of organisations, suppliers, customers, and business alliances. All these entities are engaged in the exchange of products (machine parts, software, etc.) and services (Cloud Computing, Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning capabilities). Each partner within the ecosystem has a distinctive role to play, and when done right, can together unlock more value than any individual stakeholder (Deloitte, 2020).

In addition, several European reports are published every year with the aim to assess the level of digital transformation among countries. For instance, according to the EIB Investment Survey (EIBIS) 2023<sup>3</sup>, more than half of firms invested in digitalization in response to the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, in the European Union 53% of firms report taking action to become more digital. Despite the huge commitment, significant differences emerge between countries and firm size. Based on EIBIS Index, Finland and Denmark are the top two digital countries, followed by Belgium and Sweden. However, European firms are accelerating not

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<sup>2</sup> Manufacturing Innovation Conclave 2022. Industry 4.0: from vision to action. Deloitte, 2022  
Manufacturing Innovation Conclave 2022 Industry 4.0: From vision to action

<sup>3</sup> Digitalisation in Europe 2022-2023

only the basic digitalization, but also the adoption of advanced digital technologies, such as Additive Manufacturing, Advanced Robotics, Internet of Things, Big Data and Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, and Augmented Reality. However, the implementation of advanced digital technologies requires more important investment than simple digitalization activities. Figure 2.1 represents on the left, the adoption of specific digital technologies within the European context between 2019 and 2022, and on the right the comparison of the actual situation with the United States.

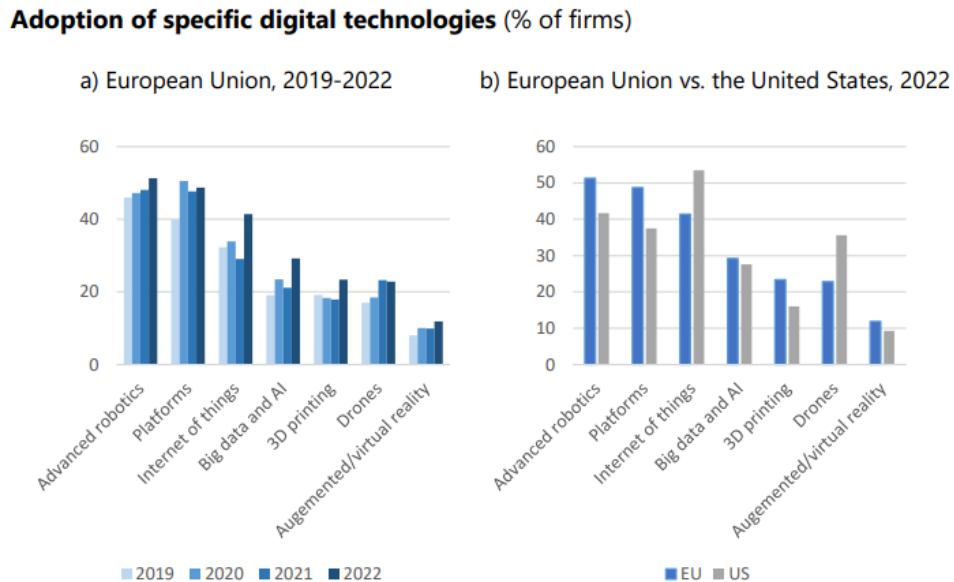


Figure 2.1: The adoption of specific digital technologies within the European Union and compared to United States (EBIS 2023)

Moreover, firm size seems to have a key role in the adoption of advanced digital technologies, with 80% of firms with a workforce composed of more than 250 employees that use advanced digital technologies, compared with 45% of companies with fewer than 10 employees. Another interesting insight is related to the investment in innovation. The study highlighted that digital firms, thus firms operating in highly digitally innovative environments, tend to invest more in innovation, while non-digital firms are less likely to invest in innovation. In other words, non-digital firms are less likely to be involved in Research and Development and to develop new products, processes, or services.

Moving to a more detailed analysis, there is another index that can provide country-specific insights. In this regard, since 2014 the European Commission has monitored Member States' progress in digital and published annual Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)<sup>4</sup> reports.

<sup>4</sup> [The Digital Economy and Society Index — Countries' performance in digitisation](#)

The DESI Index ranks Member States according to their level of digitalization and analyses their relative progress over the last five years, considering their starting point. The Figure 2.2 below shows the 2022 ranking.

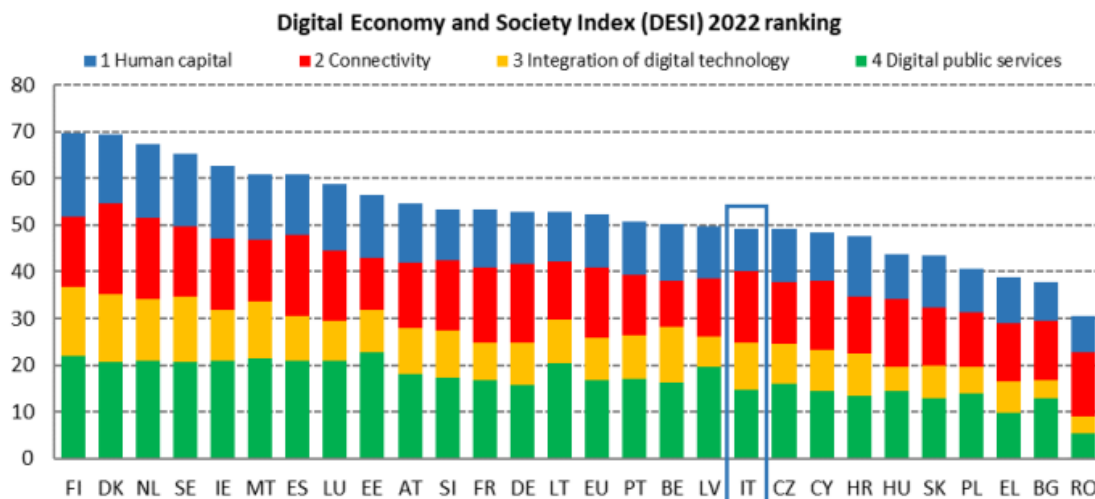


Figure 2.2: DESI 2022 ranking (DESI report, 2022)

As it is possible to note, Italy ranks 18th out of 27 EU Member States in the 2022 edition of the DESI. Looking at the DESI score over the past five years, Italy has made significant progress in closing the gap with other countries and it is advancing at a remarkable pace. Despite the positive results, Italy is reducing the gap with the European Union when it comes to basic digital skills, however over half of the Italian population do not have at least basic digital skills. In regard to companies, most Italian Small and Medium Enterprises (60%) have at least a basic level of digital intensity and, in particular, the use of cloud services recorded a significant growth, but the diffusion of other key technologies such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence is still quite limited.

### 2.1.2 Impacts of digital technologies on BtoB relationships

Different scholars have observed that digitalization is changing the rules of the market and has a significant impact on it, not only destroying companies that are unable to adapt, but also entire markets (Yaqub and Alsabban, 2023). Market conditions are thus forcing companies to improve their digital capabilities and businesses have recognized the essentiality of engaging in a digital transformation journey to achieve competitive advantage (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). The digital transformation has a huge impact not only on the market forces, but also on the relationships between actors in the market. In fact, through the support of digital technologies, companies

are able to completely or partially manage their interactions with the actors of their network and customers (Pagani and Pardo, 2017).

Digital technologies affected markets and societies by promoting continuous connectivity and new forms of interactions (Corsaro and Anzivino, 2021). In response, digital relationships have become a dominant mode of creating value for BtoB companies. Additionally, the digitalization of business relationships has changed the spatial and temporal dimensions of business interactions among suppliers, intermediaries, and buyers, leading to a context in which physical and digital spaces co-live and integrate (Corsaro and Anzivino, 2021).

Given the research focus on BtoB contexts, in analysing the impact of the advent of digital technologies on relationships, specific characteristics of BtoB markets must be considered.

Three recurring peculiarities in BtoB markets have been identified: continuity of supply relationships, market concentration, and continuous changes.

1. *Continuity of supply relationships.* Business customers are characterised by a propensity to develop long-term relationships with suppliers. The need of business customers to ensure a continuous supply of goods and services in order to keep running their business activities, leads to the continuity of the exchange relationships between customers and suppliers (Gregori and Perna, 2019).
2. *Market concentration.* From the perspective of individual companies operating in BtoB markets, there is a considerable concentration of sales and purchases in a few customers and a few suppliers. In other words, BtoB companies buy from a limited list of suppliers and then sell their products or services to a group of customers relatively restricted. This is the characteristic that most clearly differentiates BtoB contexts from BtoC ones (Gregori and Perna, 2019).
3. *Continuous changes.* Although the previous two elements may suggest a static market, it should be highlighted that in reality BtoB contexts are characterised by continuous changes, driven by factors both endogenous and exogenous to relationships. For instance, endogenous factors include changes in businesses' internal procedures, in features of products or services, or in businesses' systems. On the other hand, the competitive context, radical innovations, or the regulatory and institutional environment, represent exogenous factors (Gregori and Perna, 2019).

The above-mentioned characteristics reflect on the functioning of BtoB markets, in particular three are the aspects that characterise the functioning of BtoB contexts: interactions, widespread interdependencies, and the networked market.

1. *Interactions* are the fundamental mechanisms driving relationships between companies in business markets. In fact, companies are continuously connected to solve problems, develop innovative solutions, and initiate strategic partnerships. Interaction can be defined as the set of actions and reactions that constitute the interactive and iterative process that leads to the identification of a problem, solution, or strategy. The collaboration that should arise is an important way for a positive business development, since often innovation results from cooperation of two or more entities. Relationships derive from repeated, long-term, and complex interactions (Gregori and Perna, 2019).
2. *Widespread interdependencies* naturally characterise business relationships since each company represents a set of activities, a combination of resources and collaborators that cannot be isolated, as it is connected to activities, resources, and collaborators of other companies. The concept of interdependence emphasises how companies in BtoB markets develop mutual adjustments that lead to mutual dependencies. Individual realities incorporate in their processes knowledge and competencies coming from the outside. The interconnected set of relationships between customers and suppliers highlights the importance of this characteristic, because, by operating in these contexts, companies are able to achieve performance and results that would otherwise be impossible to achieve independently (Gregori and Perna, 2019).
3. *Networked markets* derive from each company's individual network, composed of a series of links created during the exchanges of information, knowledge, and materials with others. Each company thus becomes a point in a web of interconnected companies, and by realising its own market it contributes to the dynamics of the market network. In conclusion, the market presents itself as a network of supplier-customer relationships in which companies are the actors and the interactive approach allows them to identify and develop the best solutions (Gregori and Perna, 2019).

Table 2.2: Peculiarities and functioning aspects typical of BtoB markets - own elaboration

<b>BtoB markets</b>	
<b>Peculiarities</b>	<b>Functioning aspects</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Continuity of supply relationships</li> <li>&gt; Market concentration</li> <li>&gt; Continuous changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Interactions</li> <li>&gt; Widespread interdependencies</li> <li>&gt; Networked market</li> </ul>

Moreover, as Hakansson and Snehota (1995) suggested, BtoB relations can be described in terms of three layers: activity links, resource ties and actor bonds. First of all, companies are connected by activity links, representing the way in which commercial, technical, administrative, and other activities of a company are connected to those of another company. Resource ties enable the relation between various resources and have a high innovation potential for the company, representing the source of innovation. Finally, actor bonds are another type of connection, which lead to the creation of a network of actors supporting a better access to information and resources.

Following this model, Pagani and Pardo (2017) have identified three types of digitalization, according to the effect of digital technologies on business relationships:

- An *activity-links-centred* type of digitalization, in which digital resources lead to an optimization of already existing activities by enhancing coordination between them.
- A *resource-ties-centred* type of digitalization, in which the combination of the digital resources possessed by one actor with the resources of another actor enables the creation of new activities performed by already existing actors.
- An *actor-bonds-centred* type of digitalization, according to which digital resources allow the creation of new types of relationships between actors that were not connected before.

Moreover, according to Corsaro and D'Amico (2022) a solid digital BtoB relationship involves three main dimensions, and they are: efficiency of the interaction, coordination, and digital trust.

1. *Efficiency of interaction.* Digital systems facilitate BtoB companies in managing and handling interactions with the main actors of their network. Companies need to understand the potential of digital and adapt traditional practices to it, while in many

cases companies simply implement the approaches and the modalities they used in the physical world to the digital setting. In fact, virtual interactions represent the new way in which actors communicate and consequently the urgency to constantly remain connected, to nurture business in every situation, and to avoid any time dispersion emerged. Companies prefer to use digital tools such as social media instead of phone calls for the immediacy of interaction allowed, since they recognized that the use of traditional tools often delay the process. The same trend is visible also in the communication inside the companies, where teams communicate by using new ways of interaction based on social tools creating a continuous flow of information. Also, business meetings are now conducted online, and this new form of techno-mediated interaction is based on digital platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, allowing visual contact. These types of meetings offer several benefits such as shorter interactions, lower dispersion of resources, and a significant cost reduction. Digital technologies permit also the automation of certain activities, by avoiding waste of time on repetitive operations. Therefore, digitalization makes interactions more rapid and efficient (Corsaro and D'Amico, 2022).

2. *Coordination.* Given the remote nature of digital communications, achieving coordination between internal and external actors became even more complex. The use of virtual communications is substituting traditional face-to-face interactions and difficulties in finding a common agreement among a variety of stakeholders remain. To obtain a good level of coordination and establish a profitable relationship in the BtoB context, interests of each player must be aligned. The alignment can be facilitated by the use of digital matching platforms, which, after a preliminary analysis, allow the creation of connections between players with similar interests. An emerging complication is the increased amount of interactions, characterised by a growing variety of interlocutors, each of them with different interests and priorities. Digital technologies support companies in managing the increasing numbers of interactions and requests from stakeholders, and CRM tools are key to achieve coordination objectives by collecting and spreading the most useful interactions among stakeholders. Coordination abilities are enhanced by visualisation through the use of real-time dashboards and other visual or interactive tools, which allow to give a clear picture of the situation of the company, resources, needs and insights. Technologies such as digital collaborative platforms and CRM can also facilitate internal relationships among departments of the

same organisation, by improving collaboration between employees (Corsaro and D'Amico, 2022).

3. *Digital trust*. It is the last dimension that influences digital BtoB relationships. Digital trust is concerned with trust between digital partners and can be affected by the perception of the tools being used during processes. For instance, the use of a technology that stimulates real in-person contact, can improve the level of trust, while interacting only by chat can produce the opposite result. In general, technology can be an enabler of the relations and can affect the formation of trust in a digital environment. It is important to take into consideration that in a digital environment it is even more complex to create trust, given the reduction of physical interactions and the mediation of technology. In order to foster digital trust, companies need to adopt a more transparent approach where all conditions are highly explicit and no space for subjective interpretations is left. In the BtoB context there is a need to seek for relationships based on an equal exchange of information and transparency, avoiding vagueness and uncertain relationships. E-commerce platforms are able to provide information rapidly, and also support is considered quicker and more affordable. Moreover, relational contracts, a new form of agreement based on shared trust between partners, are substituting transactional contracts. Relational contracts focus on creating value, not only closing the deal, by promoting long term interactions instead of “one-shot” ones. Companies are now able to recognize the support of technologies such as the blockchain system, which, based on the creation of linked contracts, guarantees transparency and secure equal exchange of information, contributing to trustworthy relationships (Corsaro and D'Amico, 2022).

The fact that business exchanges and interactions are conducted in digital contexts influence the complex system of relationships among suppliers, buyers and intermediaries. As discussed above from Corsaro and D'Amico (2022), digital technologies can enrich relationships in several different ways.

Table 2.3: How digital technologies influence relationships - own elaboration

<b>Digital technologies' influence on relationships</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Interactivity</li> <li>&gt; Immediacy</li> <li>&gt; Real-time interactions and transactions</li> <li>&gt; Customised experience</li> <li>&gt; Trust</li> </ul>

First of all, digitalization has accelerated the interaction processes in BtoB promoting interactivity and immediacy. For instance, business customers expect to receive purchase offerings within less time than in the past, they interact using real-time social media, and in general they expect a higher level of immediacy during transactions and interactions (Corsaro, 2019).

The diffusion of digital technologies also impacted the value creation process, involving both customer-supplier relationships and the wider ecosystem (Corsaro, 2019). More in particular, temporal and spatial dimensions in which value is created are transformed, since the exchange of resources can occur at any time and everywhere. Moreover, the need for value creation through customised experiences increased. As stated by Parise *et al.*, (2016) digitalization affected BtoB relationships by providing highly personalised experiences and by facilitating information exchange between business actors. Regarding personalised experience, customer experience is a core element in competitive advantage in marketing management, especially for service oriented and BtoB firms (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, digital technologies are able to enhance trust among customers, as stated by Pandey *et al.*, (2020).

### **2.1.3 Challenges and opportunities of digital transformation in the BtoB context**

Even though embracing the digital transformation makes businesses more solid and resistant to changes, there are several examples of companies that have failed to successfully integrate digital resources and adapt to the digital environment (Yaquub and Alsabban, 2023). This is because technologies are posing challenges to companies, and firms that do not acknowledge their importance will struggle to survive in the near future (Paiola, 2018).

Yaqub and Alsabban (2023) summarised and explained the key challenges arising from the adoption and implementation of digital technologies.

Table 2.4: Challenges faced during the implementation and adoption of digital technologies - own elaboration.

<b>Digital technologies' implementation and adoption challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Need for a paradigm change</li> <li>&gt; Lack of financial resources</li> <li>&gt; Limited access to ICT infrastructures</li> <li>&gt; Digital readiness</li> <li>&gt; Creation of a supportive ecosystem</li> <li>&gt; Human factor</li> <li>&gt; Organisational factor</li> </ul>

First of all, businesses need a *paradigm change*, regarding how services and goods are developed, supplied, distributed, marketed and utilised. It is important to highlight that managing digitalization is not only a matter of integrating digital technologies while keeping the same manner of running traditional processes in place, but it represents a global change in the vision and approach. Second challenge is the *lack of financial resources*, given that digitalization requires high set up and transition costs, resulting in high and long-term investments. Another challenge is the *access to ICT infrastructure*. Studies such as the one of Afonsova *et al.* (2019) discovered that the digitalization of enterprises is impossible when separated from the rest of the economy. In other words, digitalization can have a positive impact on companies if the country has access to sufficiently developed digital resources and systems, including high-speed internet and widespread use of digital technologies. *Digital readiness*, which according to Nasution *et al.* (2018) can be referred to as the capacity and readiness to turn to and embrace digital technologies, as well as the willingness to create new creative opportunities through the use of technology, and it represents an essential condition for a transition towards digitalization. The extent to which a company is digitally ready highly affects the benefit that the increasing capability of emerging digital technologies is able to generate for businesses. For this reason, it is becoming progressively more important to measure companies' digital readiness. Companies need to develop sufficient levels of digital readiness and organisational capacity before they prepare to address any digital initiatives. The creation of a

*supportive ecosystem*, which includes architecture and culture, is necessary to establish favourable conditions for the successful adoption and implementation of digital processes. Therefore, companies need to recognize the importance of preparations that can facilitate the digital transformation and the use of digital technologies, in order to avoid failing in such initiatives. The *human factor* is another important challenge, since the acceptance of digitalization among employees is key to digital transformation. The successful achievement of a company's digital transformation processes will depend heavily on the level of adoption of the community, that is its employees, suppliers, partners, and customers (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). Employees may have problems welcoming new technologies and processes. Difficulties that can arise from rapid and unpredictable changes in technology within users and employees are conceptualised by numerous scholars as technology turbulence (Song *et al.*, 2005, Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). Whenever a firm introduces a new system or technology, the employees usually resist its implementation, which is the main concept of the technology turbulence (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). This must be taken into account by companies when preparing employees for changes, by providing them appropriate initiatives for training and education in order to promote an openness within personnel towards digital transformation. The *organisational factor* is the last challenge presented by Yaqub and Alsabban (2023). Although the adoption and implementation of digital processes are significantly centred on individual efforts, it can positively impact the overall competitiveness only if all stakeholders adapt and align their business needs, interests and processes. Moreover, for businesses involved in a supply chain, the quality of social embeddedness among the entire network is very impactful, since without an adequate level of trust the system might not perform efficiently. While digital technologies are enhancing productivity and competitiveness, it must be considered that not all companies are able to equally exploit the true potential of digital transformation, given that there are several challenges that companies need to overcome and constantly monitor. Failure to successfully implement and adopt digital processes entails the risk of making a company less attractive and desirable (Yaqub and Alsabban, 2023), consequently, enterprises need to be conscious of uncertainties, difficulties and challenges that derive from digitalization.

By being aware of the challenges posed by digitization, it enables companies to leverage and transform these challenges into new opportunities (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). The study of Almeida *et al.*, (2020) discusses the opportunities posed to organisations by the digitalization of their activities, focusing on three main areas: labour and social relations, marketing and sales, and technology.

Labour and social relations have experienced significant transformations due to the adoption of digital technologies. Although the role of Industry 4.0 in shaping the global business environment, people and their skills will remain at the centre of the economic activity, given the fact that the digital economy can function only if supported by a coherent strategy in terms of education and training (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). It is necessary to find and manage talents most qualified and suitable for the new challenges of the digital economy, leading to a change in the training and educational offering with the aim to provide very specific skills related to technology and digital transition. Moreover, the environmental dimension, highly compromised by the phenomena of globalisation, may benefit from the digital transformation by reducing movements and cities overcrowding (Almeida *et al.*, 2020).

Moving to the marketing and sales area, digital technologies and the changes brought have contributed to the creation of new economic opportunities. They opened new markets for new types of products, transformed entire industries, and dematerialized products (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the adoption of new technologies in organisational processes increases customer loyalty, and helps to reach new customers in international markets by reducing geographic barriers through faster communication and shared services (Almeida *et al.*, 2020).

Considering the technological component, emerging technologies play a key role in the digital transition (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). For instance, according to Maple (2017) IoT has the capacity to disrupt companies, enhance operational efficiency, and offer new types of services. The availability of data and its accessibility through continuous monitoring and measurement of activities, can transform the understanding and perception of business activities. As a result of the increase in the volume of data available to companies, there is a need to find new processes useful to analyse the high volume of heterogeneous data (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). This is expected to create a competitive advantage in which Big Data is crucial for the survival of firms in an increasingly wider business sector. Robotics is another field that is expected to expand significantly (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). The applicability of robots will increase not only by substituting human labour but also by interacting with humans (Almeida *et al.*, 2020). However, it is relevant to highlight that these three key elements related to labour and society, market and sales, and technology are strongly interconnected (Almeida *et al.*, 2020).

## **2.2 Customer Relationship Management systems and their role in managing BtoB customer relationships**

In the previous section the impact of digital technologies on interactions with customers, and more in general on businesses, has been discussed. In this evolving environment, the maintenance and nurturing of strong customer relationships has emerged as a fundamental strategy for sustainable success. Nowadays it has become important, not only to collect customers' information and extract knowledge from it, but also to exploit this knowledge in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with customers (Matraeva *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems have become increasingly indispensable tools for gaining a competitive advantage by efficiently managing their interactions with customers.

The present section of the research will firstly provide a holistic view of Customer Relationship Management, both as a technology and approach. Subsequently, a selection of statistics will shed light on the level of adoption of CRM applications. The literature provides various classifications of CRM solutions, and this study will explore some of these classifications, such as strategic, operational, and analytical. Lastly, the benefits of CRM implementation are multiple. Companies that adopt CRM systems often experience enhanced customer satisfaction, improved marketing efficiency, increased sales, and better customer retention. However, the implementation of CRM is not without its challenges. The present section will thus investigate both the advantages and challenges associated with CRM systems implementation.

### **2.2.1 Customer Relationship Management: a holistic perspective**

Acquiring customers and guaranteeing their satisfaction is the main problem in companies across all business sectors. In response, many organisations adopt CRM systems to effectively manage their customer relationships.

Customer Relationship Management can be defined, following the definition of Payne and Frow (2005), as a “cross-functional integration of processes, people, operations, and marketing capabilities that is enabled through information, technology, and applications”. The previous definition offers a strategic and holistic approach, since CRM can be referred to a process, strategy, philosophy, capability, and also technology.

The adoption of CRM aims at enhancing customer satisfaction by implementing a customer-centric business strategy (Zeynep and Toker, 2012). Customer-centric management involves practices that drive all the organisational decisions and actions through the desire to better

satisfy customers, and to do so, all processes are designed around a better understanding and a better service of customers. That said, the success of CRM goes beyond a simple customer orientation. To successfully implement a CRM approach, companies need to deal with a fundamental change in: organisational culture, organisational commitment for building better relationships with customers, management practices in the organisation, level of employee adoption, and intra-organization communication.

Despite CRM's increasing popularity in the last few years, the history of CRM is less recent. The study of Matraeva *et al.*, (2022) broadly describes the evolution of Customer Relationship Management. The origins of the formation of CRM can be traced back to the 80s of the XX century, when its main focus was to collect information about customers and to allocate priority groups through a partially automated process (Matraeva *et al.*, 2022). At that time, the concept of CRM did not yet exist. The predecessors of CRM were Database Marketing, a simple accumulation and fragmentary analysis of customer data, and Contact Management Software, a system used to manage customer information and represent them (Matraeva *et al.*, 2022). The terminology *CRM* began to be widely used since 1995. Despite CRM systems were perceived as complex softwares, companies started to adopt them, mainly for the opportunity of achieving a competitive advantage thanks to the use of information technology, which allowed them to meet the changing needs and desires of customers. It was at that point that CRM began to be considered as the new approach of Software as a Service (SaaS) (Matraeva *et al.*, 2022).

Nowadays, most of the firms make use of several tools and processes to collect customer information and data, but managing a large volume of data and using them at the right time in the BtoB context can represent a challenge (Bang and Mutum, 2012). By efficiently analysing customer data and using the information at the appropriate time, companies are able to better maintain and improve relationships. Therefore, more and more companies are adopting and implementing CRM systems, with the aim to enhance their management and build better and long-lasting customer relationships (Tihomir *et al.*, 2023).

The growing interest towards CRM applications is confirmed by different researches in this field. In particular, *Osservatorio CRM*<sup>5</sup> (2022) provides the most comprehensive CRM research in Italy. According to this research, CRM systems can be considered a mature technology with a very high level of adoption. In fact, in Italy, 69% of companies use CRM software, a percentage that has been growing steadily over the years and stabilising at around 70%. Moreover, when considering companies that have not yet completed the adoption process, but

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<sup>5</sup> [8° Osservatorio CRM: risultati finali - Osservatorio CRM](#)

they are approaching it, the percentage increases to 83% of companies. Additionally, differences in adoption are present depending on firms' size. It is mostly very large companies that have a CRM application, followed by medium-sized ones. Small ones are the ones where penetration is lower.

One important feature that can differentiate a firm from a very large number of competitors is the ability to effectively manage customer relationships and serve them efficiently (Matraeva *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, CRM applications are likely to have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. This positive effect is explained by the fact that CRM systems enable firms to customise and improve the reliability of their offerings, and to support more effectively the management of customer relationships through the different phases of the relationship (Zeynep and Toker, 2012). To enhance the BtoB relationship companies need to establish a close relation with customers and other partners, and this is facilitated by the collection of different data on customers and partners in order to obtain useful information after processing data through the CRM systems and its different functionalities (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022).

Table 2.5: CRM systems role and deriving benefits - own elaboration.

CRM systems role	Resulting benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Collection of data on customers and partners</li> <li>&gt; Storage and analysis of data</li> <li>&gt; Better understanding of customers' needs and preferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Improved customization</li> <li>&gt; Automated tasks</li> <li>&gt; Automated decision-making</li> <li>&gt; Improved customers' satisfaction</li> <li>&gt; Effective management of customer relationships</li> </ul>

CRM systems are a specialised technology that enables firms to capture, store, access, share and analyse large quantities of customer data (Suoniemi *et al.*, 2022). More in detail, CRM systems allow the analysis of a significant volume of customer data, by assisting firms involved in BtoB relationships in improving customization, performing automated routine tasks, segmentation, and prioritisation of the acquired customer data (Tihomir *et al.*, 2023). In this regard, CRM systems are associated with automated decision-making capabilities, because by analysing customer data with the support of CRM applications, businesses can automate their decision-making processes, leading to a more accurate analysis, which can highly impact the operational efficiency of firms and the level of satisfaction in BtoB relationships (Huang and

Rust, 2018). Given the large volume of data, the manual decision-making can lead to firms failing to respond to customers' needs efficiently and timely, but also can favour employees' poor and erroneous decisions. Intelligent automation provided by CRM systems' functionalities, can help employees to better manage their BtoB relationships by preventing wrong decisions or analysis (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022).

According to Tihomir, et al., (2023), an efficient analysis of customer data allows to obtain information about customers' needs and preferences, which are key to good customer relationship management, customer service and customer retention. CRM systems support companies' interactions with customers through the creation of a database of their profiles, needs, preferences, and historical transactions improving customer service and information exchange among employees (Tihomir *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to the creation of customer databases, each CRM solution has its specific features and functionalities. As argued by Matraeva *et al.*, (2022) the most common functionalities that are present in almost any CRM application, include the following blocks:

- building and maintaining a customer base;
- record all customer contacts;
- customer classification;
- standardisation of employee actions when interacting with customers;
- tracking the completion of tasks by each employee;
- subsystem of data exchange between employees;
- capture and store data about competitors.

As said before, each CRM application is designed with specific characteristics, and it is possible to identify different types of CRM according to the functionalities offered. For instance, Payne and Frow (2005) identified three forms of CRM: strategic, operational, and analytical CRM.

1. According to the strategic perspective, *strategic CRM* is viewed as a core customer centric business strategy that aims at winning and keeping profitable customers (Buttle, 2004). An important goal in strategic CRM is the alignment of the wider business strategy with customer strategy (Payne and Frow, 2005).
2. Buttle (2004) stated that *operational CRM* focuses more on automation projects within the front-office functions of selling, marketing, and service. In other words, operational CRM automates the business processes supporting the day-to-day activities of sales, marketing, and service functions across a variety of customer touchpoints and channels. According to Buttle and Iriana (2007), the overall objective of operational CRM is to

improve the efficiency and effectiveness of customer management processes, by personalising the relationship with customers, by improving organisational response to customers' needs and by increasing the speed and quality of information flows both in the organisation, and between the organisation and its external partners. Moreover, Payne and Frow (2005) point out that channel integration is a key element for operational CRM applications implementation.

3. The focus of *analytical CRM* is on the intelligent mining of customers data for strategic or tactical purposes (Buttle, 2004). With different words, Payne and Frow (2005) state that analytical CRM refers to the information management processes concerning the collection, accumulation, and analysis of customer information from customer interfaces. This type of CRM uses technology to accumulate, store, organise, interpret, distribute, and exploit customer data. Customer information supports the organisation in better understanding customer behaviour, to conduct the right transaction at the right time, and to be able to segment its market effectively. Moreover, the information management process supports the development of strategies by providing data and information about market and customer characteristics, useful in developing a customer strategy.

In addition to the different types of CRM above mentioned, these can be distinguished according to the way they are implemented in companies. In particular, it is possible to differentiate between On Premise and On Demand CRM applications. On Premise CRMs refer to those CRMs that are designed, personalised, and structured for sizable companies that have the capability and need to develop management platforms for their information (Harrigan *et al.*, 2020). This type of CRM usually has significant costs for companies and the configuration is personalised (Harrigan *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, On Demand systems offer standard functionalities and the operation is by subscription, through which it is possible to add new blocks of analysis or other functions (Harrigan *et al.*, 2020).

Independently from the type of CRM application, there are some factors that can favour a successful implementation. In this regard, several studies investigated CRM systems implementation success factors. According to Parahita *et al.*, (2021) there are three components that must be integrated for the successful implementation of a CRM solution, which are: processes, people, and technology. For each of these three components Chalmeta (2005) identifies different success factors, as summarised in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6: Factors that can favour a successful implementation of a CRM application - own elaboration.

Process perspective	People perspective	Technology perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Time and budget management</li> <li>&gt; Vision</li> <li>&gt; Objectives</li> <li>&gt; Strategy</li> <li>&gt; Willingness to share data</li> <li>&gt; Customer involvement</li> <li>&gt; Continuous improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Awareness and management support</li> <li>&gt; Knowledge management</li> <li>&gt; Employees' knowledge and capabilities</li> <li>&gt; Team participation and motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; IT and infrastructure readiness</li> <li>&gt; System integration capabilities</li> <li>&gt; CRM technology</li> </ul>

### 2.2.2 Advantages and Challenges of CRM solutions

A successful implementation of a CRM solution can bring with it a variety of advantages and benefits. Eight main benefits are recognized and highly valued, according to Mohammadhossein *et al.*, (2012).

1. *Improved customer knowledge.* CRM solutions give a competitive advantage in improving companies' collection of customer information. Companies are able to track customer behaviour, preferences and needs by collecting and analysing customer data (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).
2. *Enhanced customer segmentation.* Segmentation can be defined as the process by which elements are categorised or classified according to similarities into groups. In CRM systems, segmentation is used to categorise customers according to similar characteristics. Ordinary categories of segmentation are for example demographics, psychographics or behavioural characteristics. CRM systems provide the possibility to divide customers into similar groups based on their needs and requirements, facilitating the process of segmentation for companies (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).

3. *Increased customised products and services.* Personalisation involves the ability and skill of understanding customers' needs and requirements. Therefore, in order for companies to provide personalised products or services, they need to improve their knowledge about customers' preferences, requirements and wants. CRM applications allow the collection and analysis of customer information, therefore companies are able to concentrate on what the customer desires to purchase, more than what the company wants to sell and is facilitated in meeting customers' needs by providing personalised services (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).
4. *Improved responsiveness to customer's needs.* Customer responsiveness is related to providing customers with what they expect to obtain. CRM is a powerful tool to help companies to focus more proactive on their customers' responsiveness. Through the information and functionalities of CRM systems, companies can show that they are able to understand and, consequently, respond to customers' situations and needs (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).
5. *Multi-channel integration.* Nowadays the range of customers channel choice is increased and CRM applications can facilitate the management of customer relationships inside a multichannel environment. Multi-channel customers are more loyal and spend more than other customers. A successful multi-channel integration is heavily dependent on firms' ability to collect the information from all the channels and incorporate it with the already existing information (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).
6. *Time saving.* Reducing time to market is highly important for companies that are looking for a competitive edge. CRM solutions can simplify the development and deployment cycle to respond to customers. Moreover, the use of CRM systems reduce the use of paper during the interactions with customers. All the activities can be virtualized and automated within a CRM solution, reducing time and wastes (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).
7. *Improved customer service efficiency and effectiveness.* Customer service refers to the communication among a customer and the company, usually through fixed channels such as phone or email. With a certain frequency, customers will have concerns or requests to be resolved. CRM applications enable businesses with the ability to produce, allocate and manage requests submitted by customers. Moreover, CRM systems have a positive impact on customer service quality, by allowing companies to be more

responsive to customers' needs, by personalising services, by efficiently creating and scheduling appointments with customers, and by providing multi-channel communication (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).

8. *Improved marketing customization.* Marketing customization means that the company adapts and changes products or services for each customer, according to customers' interests. Also, communication can be personalised, thanks to the information gathered through the CRM (Mohammadhossein *et al.*, 2012).

As discussed before, there are several advantages deriving from the use of CRM systems. However, there are also challenges while adopting CRM applications in firms.

Table 2.7: Challenges faced during CRM system implementation - own elaboration.

<b>CRM system implementation challenges</b>
> Technology turbulence
> Lack of resources and skills
> Privacy issues

The implementation of a new technology can raise some issues, conceptualised as technology turbulence, one further challenge related to CRM implementation (Song *et al.*, 2005). Technology turbulence refers to the concept that users of a new technology could become inhibitors of it, by raising excuses, doubting the user-friendliness of the new technology, or by complaining about the lack of readiness to use the new technology (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). In order to overcome the present challenge, the role of management is particularly important (Tihomir *et al.*, 2023). It is evident that when a new software or technology in general is introduced, employees initially find it difficult to integrate and accept the change, although the management can stimulate employees in encouraging the use of the software (Tihomir *et al.*, 2023). In these cases, management should actively and effectively support the introduction by convincing employees about the significant benefits of adopting the new technology and thus removing employees' initial hesitation (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). The role of leadership is extremely critical because through the skills, expertise and capabilities leaders can help to overcome employees' feeling of uncertainty (Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

Another challenge is related to the lack of resources and skills. For the implementation to be successful, it is essential to develop individual skills and capabilities to effectively integrate and

work with the new technology (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). As shown by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022 report, over half of Italian people do not have at least basic digital skills, positioning the Italian workforce below the EU average. Privacy issues are another risk factor affecting the implementation of CRM applications (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). The collection and storage of data bring with them a variety of issues concerning security and protection of information. For this reason, companies must deal with legislation and regulation, which play an essential role in privacy protection (Shui, 2016).

### **2.2.3 CRM systems implementation: the role of consultants**

External CRM consultants typically have a significant involvement in both the designing and leading implementation, and as a result, they share at least partially the responsibility for the frequency of unsuccessful CRM initiatives (Suoniemi *et al.*, 2022). Despite the increasingly fundamental role played by CRM consultants, the literature lacks in-depth studies on the present topic. In particular, the study of Suoniemi *et al.*, (2022) examines the role of CRM consultants in overcoming potential implementation challenges. According to the authors, consultants must concurrently address two key activities as part of the implementation process: the integration of CRM applications with various enterprise systems and technologies (including social media applications, marketing automation tools, artificial intelligence, etc.), and the adaptation of the CRM system's design to meet the specific needs of different users. In fact, CRM consultants are required to carry out different CRM projects which involve a substantial amount of system customization and integration efforts. Simultaneously, CRM consultants are responsible for understanding client firm's needs and for carrying out modifications to the system according to those needs. Knowledgeable and expert CRM consultants can significantly reduce the risk of unexpected organisational and technical issues that could negatively affect CRM projects outcomes. On the contrary, in absence of sufficient consulting resources, the CRM application is unlikely to align with the client firm's expectations in terms of system quality (Suoniemi *et al.*, 2022). According to the same authors, another crucial factor that affects system implementation success is user involvement, which can be defined as user active engagement with and actual participation in the CRM implementation project. Moreover, user involvement represents a facilitating condition for CRM consultants (Suoniemi *et al.*, 2022).

# Chapter 3: Empirical Investigation

## 3.1 Research methodology

The literature review conducted in the previous chapters, highlighted the transformative impact that the two forces of digital transformation and servitization are driving. The continuous adoption of digital technologies has a strong influence on the relationship between individuals and entities involved in BtoB processes. CRM systems are an example of technology that can directly be applied to the management of customer relationships, driven by the growing need to better understand the customer in order to build long lasting relationships. The literature confirms how a successful implementation of a CRM solution can bring with it a variety of advantages and benefits, even though the introduction of a new technology can raise some issues.

Despite the increasingly fundamental role of CRM systems and CRM consultants, the literature lacks in-depth studies on the present topic. For this reason, the goal of this dissertation is to answer the following research questions: “*What is the impact of digital technologies on customer relationships?*” and “*What is the role of CRM systems, and which are the main advantages and challenges that companies face during the implementation process?*”. More in detail, on one side, the goal is to investigate the level of adoption and the factors of selection of a specific digital technology, CRM systems, considering for example the characteristics and functionalities mostly required in the market, with a focus on integration and ease of use. On the other side, advantages and criticalities related to CRM systems use are investigated, as well as the impact of digital technologies on BtoB relationships. Given the complex and emergent nature of the phenomenon under investigation, a mixed methodology approach has been deemed appropriate for the empirical investigation of this study, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach.

The quantitative part of the present research involves an investigation of the market through the diffusion of a survey, focused on examining customers' perceptions and adoption of CRM systems. The survey was conducted between the months of May and August 2023 and a total number of 80 respondents was reached, categorising companies according to their level of interest and approach towards CRM systems. Further to the quantitative analysis, an in-depth cross-case analysis with four different case studies was conducted. The case studies were identified following a theoretical sampling approach, which according to Coyne (1997) involves a selection of interviewed companies based on theoretical findings, and which led to

the selection of cases that could provide a satisfactory variety of situations. The mixed approach has a dual purpose of delving deeper into the topics that emerged from the analysis of the data obtained from the quantitative analysis, and of investigating the influence of technology on the relationships between companies and customers. In the next paragraphs methodologies and findings of both the analyses are discussed and presented in detail.

## **3.2 Quantitative analysis**

The aim of quantitative research is to better define the characteristics of CRM systems, the relevance of their functionalities, customers' expectations, and in general, actual trends of the CRM systems market. The 80 respondent companies, involved in different industries (see below in Figure 3.2) and localised in Northern Italy, are divided based on their level of interest and approach towards CRM systems. The analysis of results will follow this classification for the purpose of analysing results within each category but at the same time to compare results between different categories, in other words by allowing within-category analysis and cross-category comparisons.

### **3.2.1 Quantitative methodology**

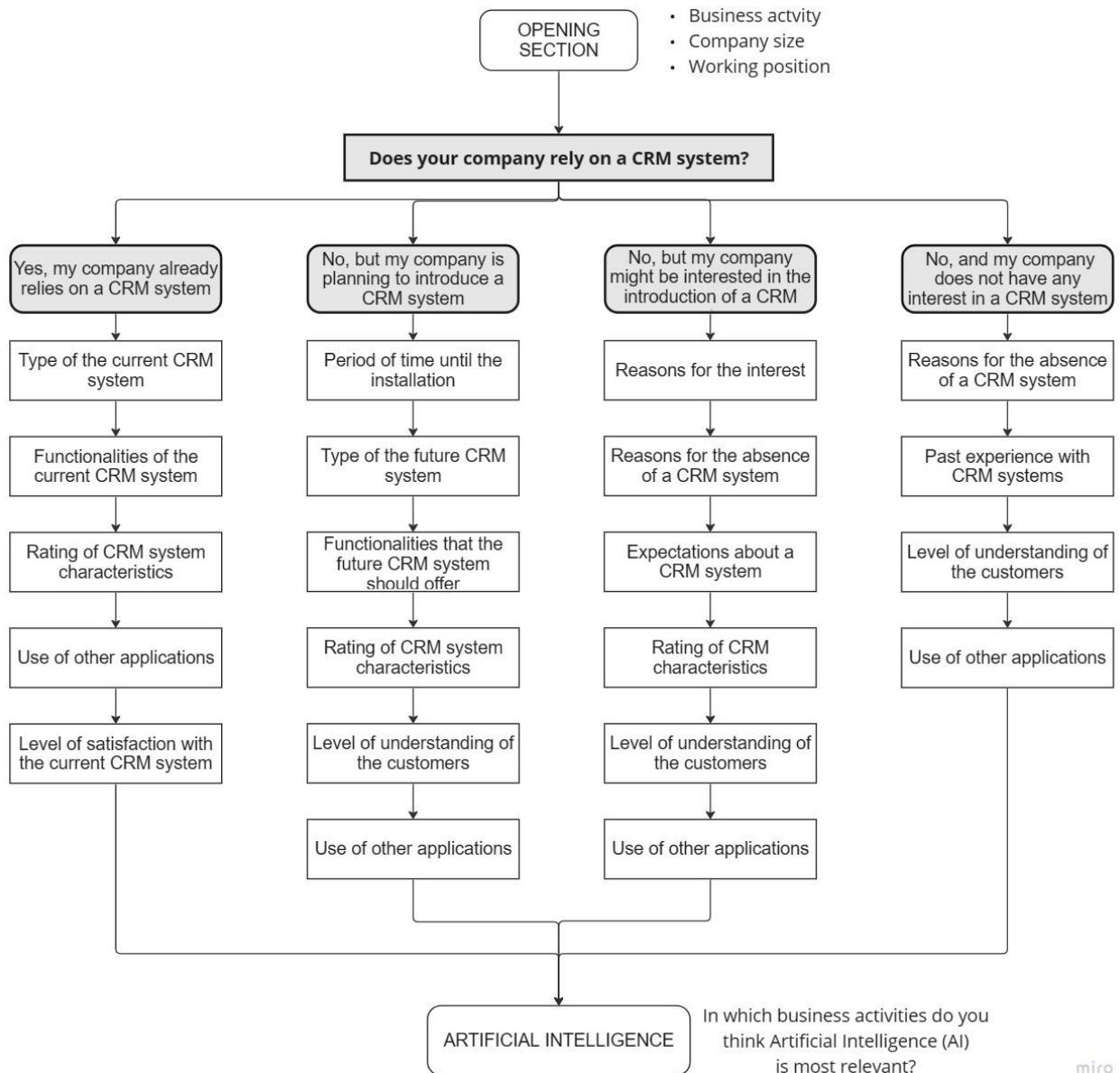
#### **3.2.1.1 Structure of the survey**

Different question types were included in the survey, in particular: multiple choice, open-ended, and ranking questions. Moreover, all questions were set as compulsory.

For what concern the structure of the survey, it consisted of six different parts. The first part included some opening questions for all responders in order to identify the composition of the sample, such as: business activity, annual turnover, and working position. Secondly, responders were directed to four relevant subcategories based on the answers to the question “*Does your company rely on a CRM system?*”. In this way, it was possible to identify four different paths: companies with a CRM system, companies planning to install a CRM system, companies interested in a CRM system but not planning to adopt it, and companies not interested at all. Each path consisted of the questions related to a specific group. In other words, companies that already have the CRM system fell into the first category and, hence, they replied to the questions dedicated to them. At the end of each different path, all companies converged to the last section of the survey, devoted to Artificial Intelligence and email collection. It is worth noting that a fifth path was planned for companies that did not know what a CRM system is. From now on, we will not consider this fifth path because none of the companies followed it.

Figure 3.1 provides a simplified overview of the structure of the questionnaire, while the detailed composition of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1.

Figure 3.1: Flowchart of the survey's structure - own elaboration



### 3.2.1.2 Data collection methods

The survey employed in this research was designed and disseminated through a combination of online tools, in order to ensure both efficiency and a targeted approach to the collection of data. The survey instrument was created with the support of Google Forms, a widely accessible and user-friendly online survey platform. It provides the advantage of easy customization, enabling the inclusion of different question types and response options. This customization and

flexibility has been particularly significant in tailoring the survey to the specific needs and objective of the research. The dissemination of the survey represents a crucial aspect of the research process, as it directly affects the quality and diversity of received responses. To maximise the reach and engagement of potential participants, different approaches were adopted:

- *Massive email campaign* via Mailchimp, an email marketing platform, to reach as many participants as possible, given the usual very high retention rates. Email communication included a clear and compelling call to action, in order to encourage participation in the survey;
- *Personal phone calls* were made to selected companies based on their interactions with the email campaign previously sent;
- *One-to-one LinkedIn messages* were sent to a targeted group of professionals who were identified as key respondents based on their business role. Positions such as IT managers, sales representatives, and CEO were the preferred ones. One-to-one interactions proved crucial in the last days of data collection to boost the number of participants.

### **3.2.2 Quantitative findings**

#### **3.2.2.1 Composition of the sample**

For what concern the composition of the sample it is possible to make considerations about: working positions, business activities, and company size. As already mentioned, a total number of 80 respondents was reached, and among them the majority belong to upper and middle management roles, with a clear prevalence of CEOs that represent 49% of the entire sample, followed by managerial positions (16%).

Considering business activities there is again a prevalence of certain sectors among respondent companies, as shown in Figure 3.2. The Information Technology (IT) and Software sector takes the lead with 29%, followed closely by Production and Manufacturing (27%), and Consulting and Services (26%). These first three sectors considered all together dominate the sample. The remaining sectors include Trade and Distribution (10%), Marketing (4%), and others (4%).

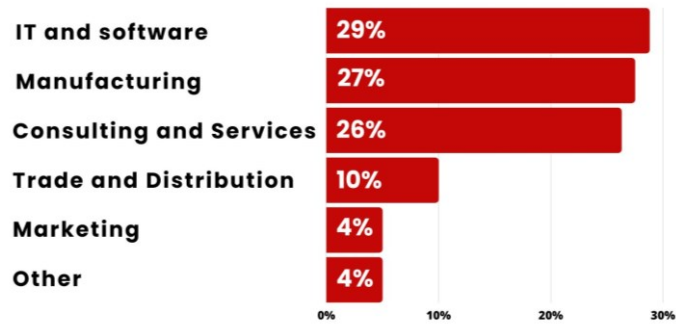


Figure 3.2: The sectors among the sample - own elaboration

Looking at the company size, companies are categorised based on their annual turnover. The majority of companies investigated (57.5%) have an annual turnover lower than 5 million euros, indicating a high prevalence of small enterprises in the sample. After that, 28.75% and 13.75% reported respectively an annual turnover between 5 and 50 million euros, and over 50 million euros. Consequently, it is possible to state that the sample is dominated by SMEs.

Intersection between the two dimensions, sector and company size, confirms the prevalence of small enterprises in every sector, with the exception of the manufacturing sector, where there is a predominance of medium companies.

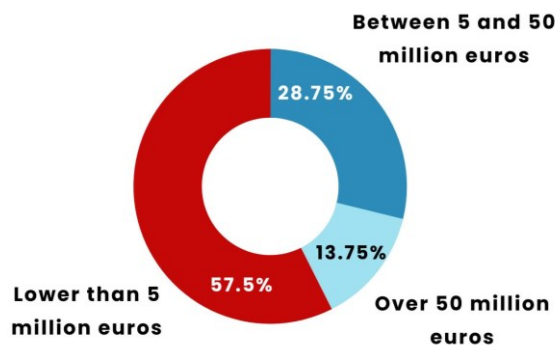


Figure 3.3: Revenue distribution among the sample - own elaboration

### 3.2.2.2 The adoption of CRM systems

To obtain insights into the proportion of CRM users within the sample, respondents were queried with the question “*Does your company rely on a CRM system?*”. Based on their answers to this question, the respondents were divided into four categories with the following distribution:

- 62.5%: Yes, my company already relies on a CRM system;
- 17.5%: No, but my company is planning to introduce a CRM system;
- 15%: No, but my company might be interested in the introduction of a CRM system;
- 5%: No, and my company would not have any interest in introducing a CRM system.

Analysing the percentage of companies currently utilising a CRM system, it is possible to distinguish between four different categories, as shown in Figure 3.4.

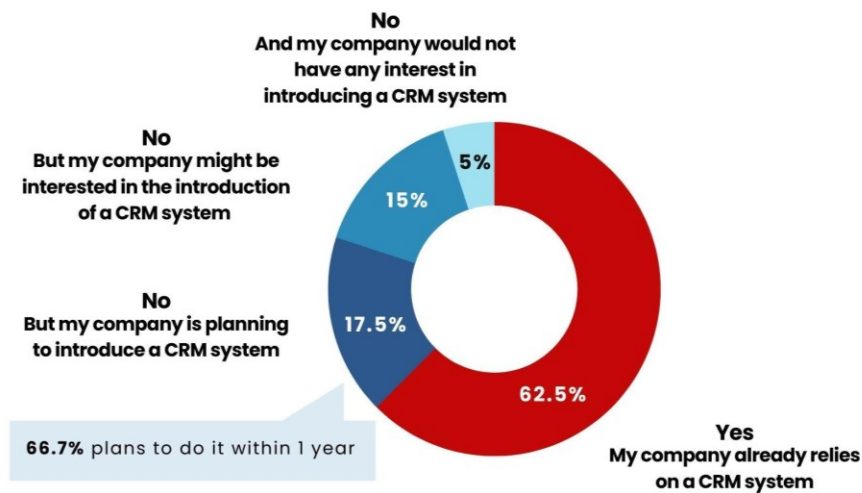


Figure 3.4: Companies level of adoption of CRM systems

The first category represents the major portion of the sample, 62.5%, by collecting companies that already have a CRM system. The second category includes all companies that currently do not have a CRM system but have planned its introduction in the near future. In fact, 66.7% of this segment states that they will introduce it within one year. Consequently, 25% and 8.3% of respondents are planning to install it within and after two years, respectively. The third category consists of companies that are interested in implementing a CRM system but have not yet planned its adoption, representing 15% of the total sample. Only a small percentage of participants, corresponding to 5%, declares no interest in implementing a CRM system. It is important to highlight that in the proceeding analysis, the results are often referred to these four main groups of companies. This approach could allow for a comprehensive understanding of how the needs and interests towards CRM evolve as a company progresses from expressing interest to planning for implementation and finally using a CRM system.

Therefore, 80% of companies have a CRM system or are in the process of implementing one. These data confirm that CRM solutions can be considered a mature technology with a significant adoption rate. Moreover, these data are in line with the results of other important studies in Italy, such as *Osservatorio CRM 2023*, which shows that in Italy the number of companies using CRM software has been steadily increasing over the years and is now stabilising at around 70%.

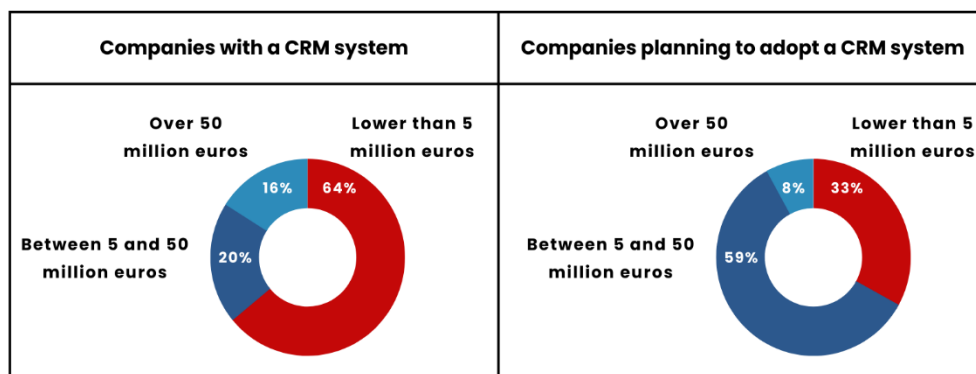
Looking at the results from a different perspective, the one of technology providers, 62.5% of the respondents are unlikely to be potential customers for CRM providers. On the contrary, by adding the two groups of respondents who are either planning to install a CRM system or are

interested in installing one, it can be assumed that 32.5% are potential customers for CRM providers.

*Adoption and revenue distribution*

Analysing the revenue distribution among the different categories of companies could have a twofold benefit. First of all, this could facilitate the market segmentation for CRM providers, by identifying revenue-related trends within CRM adoption stages. Secondly, this approach could allow to understand how the adoption of the CRM system impacts company revenues. Graphs and data of revenue distribution are provided below in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Adoption and revenue distribution - own elaboration



Considering companies that already have a CRM system, revenues are distributed as follows: 64% of companies that reported revenues lower than 5 million euros, 20% of companies between 5 and 50 million euros revenue and lastly 16% of companies with revenues above 50 million euros. Looking instead at companies planning to adopt a CRM system there is a clear predominance of companies with an annual turnover between 5 and 50 million euros (59%), followed by companies with an annual turnover below 5 million euros (33%) and over 50 million euros (8%). It is not possible to identify the impact of CRM systems' adoption on revenues, since there is not a clear correlation. However, these findings demonstrate that CRM systems are useful not only for large companies, but also for small organisations.

*Adoption of different types of CRM systems*

In the market there are different types of CRM applications available, and by analysing which types are most demanded in the market it is possible to understand trends that are shaping the market of CRM solutions. Understanding which CRM systems are gaining popularity can provide valuable insights for CRM vendors, helping them adapt their offerings to meet market

demands. The following table (Table 3.2) compares results between companies that already have a CRM system and companies that are planning to introduce it.

Table 3.2: Insights on the adoption of different types of CRM systems

The CRM system is ...	Companies with a CRM system	Companies planning to adopt a CRM system
International or Italian? ■ International ■ Italian ■ Not yet defined		
Proprietary or Open Source? ■ Proprietary ■ Open Source ■ Not yet defined		
In Cloud or On Premise? ■ In Cloud ■ On Premise ■ Not yet defined		

Focusing on the first row in Table 3.2, it is evident that the greatest portion of companies that already have a CRM system, use an international software (74%). Comparing this result to the one for companies planning to adopt a CRM system, it is possible to observe that in contrast there is a predominance of Italian CRM software for these companies, with 33.3% of the companies planning to introduce an Italian system and 25% planning to adopt an international one.

Investigating whether the companies use a proprietary or open-source solution for their CRM system, it is evident that the majority of the companies (72%) use a proprietary solution. This relation is reversed for the companies planning to install, where a slight predominance of 33.3% plans to install an open-source solution as opposed to 25% planning to install a proprietary solution. This could indicate that open source solutions are gaining popularity, however it is hard to conclude that this is the cause due to the low number of respondents of companies planning to install a CRM system.

Moreover, 82% of the companies use in cloud software as opposed to 12% using on premise software. For the companies planning to install a CRM system, in cloud software dominates as well, with 33.3% of the companies planning to install in cloud software, as opposed to 25% planning to install on premise software. This might indicate that in cloud software is the most

attractive on the market. Again, one should keep in mind that the total number of respondents is not large enough to draw a final conclusion.

However, it is worth noting that among companies intending to implement a CRM system, the majority of these companies, up to 41.7%, do not know yet which type of CRM system to implement, nor the provider they will choose. This highlights a significant level of uncertainty among future CRM users, even though the vast majority claims they will adopt the system within a year.

### 3.2.2.3 The interest in CRM systems within companies not planning any adoption

To explore the current status of companies showing interest in CRM systems but not planning their adoption, motivations and expectations were investigated. Visual representations of these findings are provided in Figure 3.5.

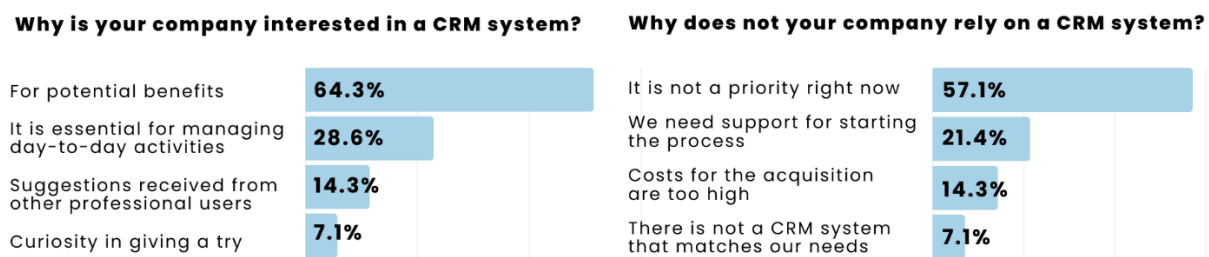


Figure 3.5: Motivations and expectations within companies without any plans of adoption

More in detail, among the reasons why companies are interested in introducing a CRM system emerged mainly a clear awareness of the potential benefits that a CRM system can offer. Specifically, 64.3% of companies answered the question “*What are the reasons why your company is interested in a CRM system?*”, by highlighting that potential benefits are at least one of the motivations of their interest. Among the mentioned potential benefits there are improvements in business performance, enhancement of integration and increase in customer satisfaction. The second most prevalent motivation, selected by 28.6% of respondents, is the acknowledgement of CRM systems as an essential tool for day-to-day operations management. The remaining motivations include recommendations received from other professionals, and curiosity in giving a try (respectively 14.3% and 7.1%).

Another area of investigation focused on uncovering the reasons behind companies’ current non-adoption of CRM systems. It emerged that a significant portion of companies (57.1%) do not perceive the adoption of a CRM system as a priority for their business. This appears somewhat paradoxical considering that at the same time companies seem to recognize the

advantages associated with the use of a CRM system. Moreover, companies have highlighted a lack of support for initiating the process of introduction (21.4%) as a key deterrent. These data reveal the concept that the process of selection and adoption of CRM systems is characterised by a certain degree of complexity. It is for this reason that many companies seek support from external partners, such as consultants or other industry professionals. The need for support could represent a potential focal point for CRM providers that could establish pathways to facilitate the introduction of CRM systems.

Furthermore, the study delves into the expectations of companies. The primary advantage expected from the implementation of a CRM system is the improvement in customer service and customer satisfaction (71.4%), followed closely by the increase in corporate performance (42.9%) and customer retention (28.6%). These expectations are also in line with the growing interest towards customers that the business environment is facing, with the prevailing trend in investing in longer lasting relations.

### 3.2.2.4 Functionalities and characteristics of CRM systems

One of the most important aspects of the present investigation is to identify significant functionalities and characteristics of the CRM system. In other words, which features and functionalities of CRM systems clients value more, and which of them are of minor importance.

#### *Functionalities of CRM systems*

Companies that already have a CRM system were asked to select the functionalities provided by their actual software. Results are shown in the graph below in Figure 3.6, making it immediate to find out which functionalities are currently the most provided in the market.



Figure 3.6: Functionalities offered in the CRM systems market

The functionalities most commonly found in CRM systems among current users are: centralized databases, contact management, and customer data viewing. In contrast, functionalities like sales forecasting, analysis of customer data, and optimisation of internal communications are less prevalent in CRM systems. This suggests that the primary use of CRM solutions among these companies is mostly related to data management, with less emphasis on sales-related functions or internal communication improvement.

The situation looks slightly different for companies planning to install CRM systems. In comparison with the previous scenario, the following results are based on expectations, since these companies are expecting to get the proposed functionalities, whereas the previous ones were current users of CRM applications. In the graph below, in Figure 3.7, it is possible to observe the expected functionalities that emerged among companies in the planning stage of a CRM solution implementation.

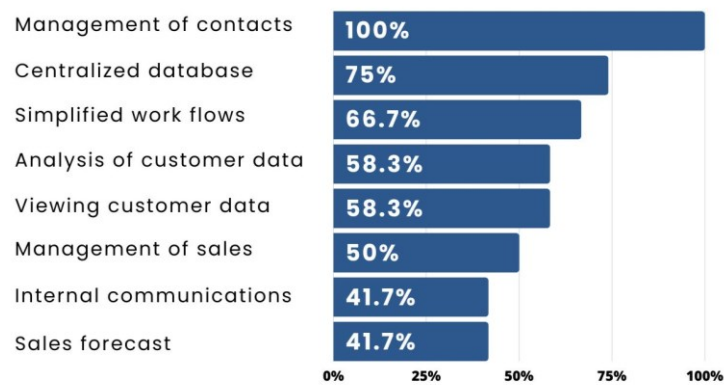


Figure 3.7: Expectations in functionalities of CRM systems

Although, expectations are almost entirely in line with the functionalities currently offered in the market. Only two main differences can be highlighted: for companies planning to install a CRM system, the management of contacts is more important than centralized databases; and also the existence of simplified work flows is more important than the ability to view customer data, which is considered equally important to management of sales performance. Again, the main concept that emerges from the analysis of these data is that companies focus more on collecting and managing customer data rather than analysing it, with the aim of improving performance and making sales forecasts.

#### *Features of CRM systems*

Similarly, companies were asked to rate from 1 to 6 the importance of the proposed CRM features (where 1 stands for *not important at all* and 6 for *extremely important*). The response scale is a Likert scale, with an even number of options. As a result, without a neutral point,

respondents are forced to take a stance, reducing uncertainty or indifference. Table 3.3 presents the results divided by the two main categories of firms.

Table 3.3: The relevance of CRM systems features

	Extremely important			Less important	
Companies with a CRM system	Integration with other systems and software	Easiness of use	Customization according to company needs	Limited costs	Advanced analysis features
Companies planning to adopt a CRM system	Integration with other systems and software	Easiness of use	Customer service and employee training	Based on cloud	Advanced analysis features

In particular, results show that companies that already have CRM systems highly value several key factors: integration with other systems and software, the ease of use, and the possibility to customize the system according to their needs. Conversely, limitations in costs and the existence of advanced analytical features are of lesser importance to them. Furthermore, even among companies that are planning to adopt a CRM system, the capacity of seamless integration with other systems and software stands out as a highly important factor. Consequently, it is possible to state that integration is a widely valued characteristic. This interest in platform integration aligns with another key finding from the questionnaire, where 66% of companies utilising a CRM system reported requiring 2-4 different applications to have a global and comprehensive view of their customers, opposed to only needing 1 or needing more than 4 applications. Interestingly, this result remains relatively unchanged when asking the same question to companies without a CRM system, as 69% of them also indicated the need for 2-4 applications. These findings strongly suggest potential shortcomings in the integration between CRM software and other platforms within the existing CRM systems.

### 3.2.2.5 Assessing satisfaction among companies with and without a CRM system

This section aims to provide insight into the satisfaction of both companies that already have a CRM system, as well as companies that do not currently have one. Moreover, a secondary aim is to uncover potential areas for enhancement among CRM users, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the specific characteristics and attributes that could elevate the CRM system’s appeal to customers. Detailed graphical representations illustrating this section’s findings are provided in figures below.

Companies without CRM systems, who are considering installation, were asked to rate their current applications effectiveness in understanding their customers on a Likert scale from 1 - *Not well at all* to 6 - *Extremely well*.

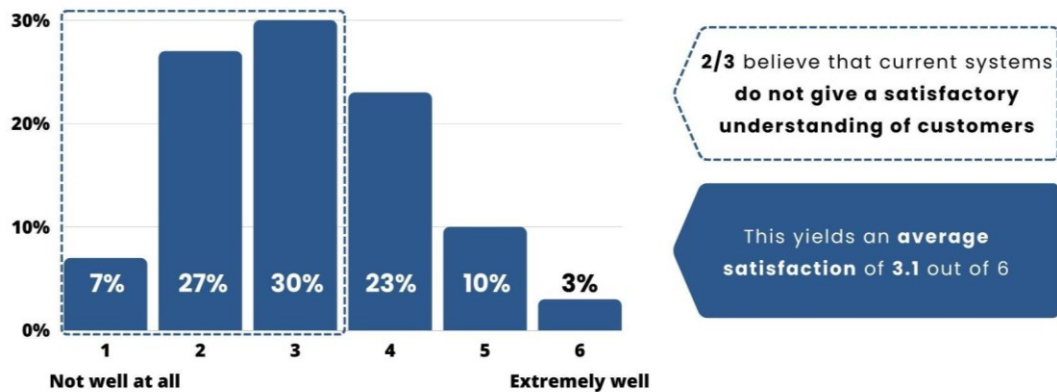


Figure 3.8: Satisfaction among companies without a CRM system

As shown in Figure 3.8, the most frequently reported levels of satisfaction were 2 and 3, respectively with a response rate of 27% and 30%. The average satisfaction is 3.1, with 64% of respondents indicating a low satisfaction level of 3 or lower, and who thus can be said to be not satisfied with their current applications. Consequently, it can be inferred that this 64% of companies, assuming that they have an interest in understanding their customers, will constitute potential customers that are easier to attract for CRM providers.

Equivalently, companies that already have a CRM system were asked to rate “*On a scale from 1 to 6, how satisfied are you with your current CRM system?*” from 1 - *Not well at all* to 6 - *Extremely well*. Detailed graphical representations are given in Figure 3.9.

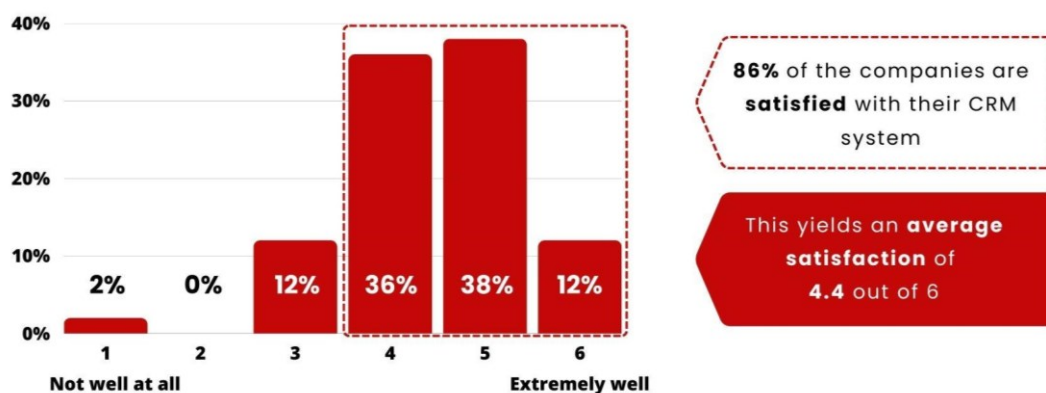


Figure 3.9: Satisfaction among companies with a CRM system

Most respondents (38%) expressed a high satisfaction level with a score of 5, contributing to a relatively robust average satisfaction rating of 4.4. When considering the total of respondents reporting a satisfaction level of 4 or higher, it can be concluded that 86% of the companies are

satisfied with their current CRM system. Consequently, this established market share presents a considerable challenge for CRM providers seeking to attract these satisfied customers.

#### *Feedback from CRM users for enhancing their CRM system*

While overall satisfaction levels among CRM users were notably high, 38 out of the 50 responding companies in this category offered valuable suggestions for potential improvements to their CRM solutions. The most prevalent feedback focuses on enhancing data and/or system integration.

*“... integration with other software and platforms to centralise and improve data management”.*

Analysing feedback, two are the main aspects mentioned: integration and ease of use. Companies expressed the desire for a better integration of their CRM system with various digital platforms, including social media, websites, WhatsApp, and calendars.

Furthermore, several respondents highlighted the importance of enhancing the user interface of their CRM systems:

*“Easier and more intuitive to use”.*

*“I would make the GUI a little more modern and captivating”.*

In addition to the above-mentioned primary feedback, respondents also identify other areas of potential improvement, including: cost reduction, better customization, mobile accessibility, better data extraction and having complete customer data available, and including history and notes from colleagues who have dealt with the customers earlier.

### **3.3 Qualitative cross-case analysis**

The goal of the qualitative analysis is to investigate advantages and challenges related to CRM systems use and implementation, as well as the influence of digital technologies on BtoB customer relationships. The qualitative analysis is complementary to the quantitative one, offering an enriched and more profound comprehension of the topics emerged from the survey data analysis. Moreover, it extends the focus of this study by investigating the impact of technologies on customer relationships, which represents an aspect unexplored within the quantitative research. For these reasons, a qualitative multiple case analysis approach has been deemed appropriate for this second part of the empirical investigation of the study. In fact, in explanatory research cross-cases analysis is particularly suggested, especially when examining

interfirm changes associated with complex phenomena, like the impact of digital tools on customer relationships.

### 3.3.1 Qualitative methodology

#### 3.3.1.1 Preliminary investigation

Exploiting the University’s network as well as the professional knowledge of the thesis’s supervisor, one company involved in the provision of technology was identified in order to discuss the shift towards a more customer-centric approach pursued through CRM solutions and the role of CRM consultants, as well as to have supplementary support regarding the selection of the case studies. Interesting insights emerged from the discussion with experts of the sector and Table 3.4 summarises the main traits of the interview.

Table 3.4: Consultants interviews - own elaboration

Informant’s position	Method	Date	Duration
CEO Member Board of Directors Marketing Manager	Face-to-face in presence meeting	18/04/2023	70 min

#### 3.3.1.2 Companies selection

The consultants’ interview resulted in a list of nine proposed companies to investigate, operating in different markets and sectors. In order to select four companies as the main case studies, a matrix with two dimensions was created. The first dimension refers to the type of market customer (business entities or end consumers), distinguishing between companies operating in the BtoB or BtoC sector. The second dimension refers to the level of technological knowledge, with reference to CRM systems. In other words, it refers to the level of prior knowledge in the usage of CRM systems, distinguishing between low level and high level.

According to the above-mentioned criteria the following matrix was completed (Figure 3.10), companies are identified with letters (from A to D). This is to preserve confidentiality, so that all the companies and individual informants are anonymized.

		<b>Prior knowledge</b>	
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Type of market</b>	<b>BtoB</b>	Company A	Company B
	<b>BtoC</b>	Company C	Company D

Figure 3.10: Matrix for the selection of the four case studies - own elaboration

Moreover, Table 3.5 provides the outline of the four companies involved.

Table 3.5: Companies outline - own elaboration.

Case study	Industry	Size (million € 2022)	Size (employees)
A	Asphalt and concrete	345	582
B	Pesticides, fertilisers and seeds	44	14
C	Customised furniture	8.3	35
D	Modern and design furniture	13.4	69

Source: Orbis database

### 3.3.1.3 Protocol

Two main methodologically acknowledged techniques have been primarily used for the data collection: semi-structured interviews and secondary data.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Face-to-face online interviews were the primary source of data. The interview protocol was standardised across informants, with some specific adjustments for each firm. Interviews lasted at least 40 minutes including both general questions about the company and their business models, and more specific questions about the digital tools currently implemented, the consequences of the adoption of a CRM system, and future strategies. Prior to each interview, the outline available in Appendix 2 was sent to all the respondents. In total, four interviews were conducted involving five different informants as detailed in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Interviews details - own elaboration

Case study	Informant	Method	Date	Duration
A	Commercial Director	Online meeting	28/09/2023	50 min
B	CEO	Online meeting	01/08/2023	60 min
C	Web Marketing Manager and Digital Marketing Manager	Online meeting	19/09/2023	70 min
D	Chief Marketing Officer	Online meeting	20/09/2023	40 min

Each interview was audio-recorded in order to allow a subsequent transcription and codification, according to the acknowledged procedures (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Voss, 2010).

#### *Secondary data*

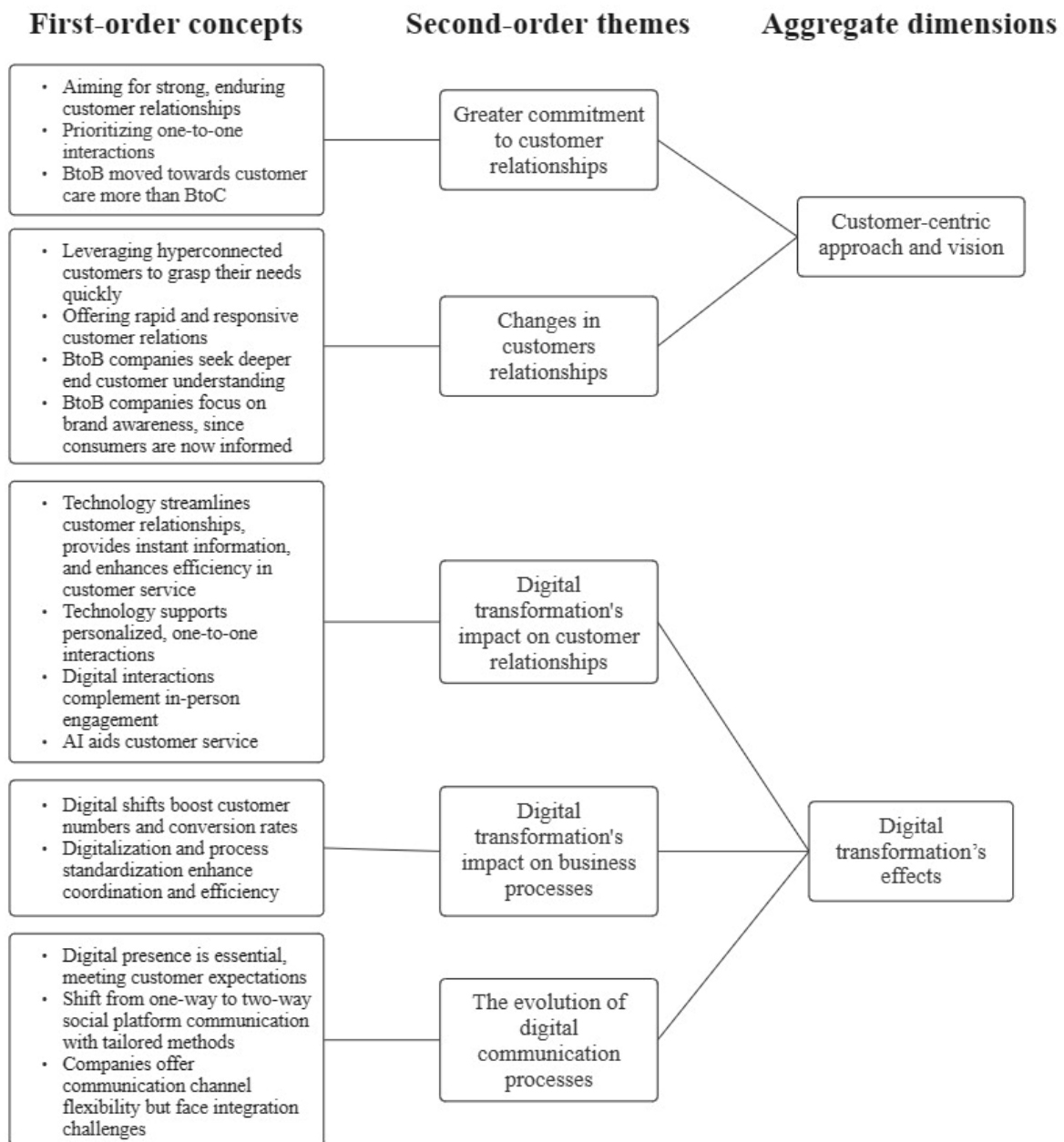
Further data were collected from the corporate websites, as well as some considerations were made looking at their corporate profiles on different professional social platforms. This second process of data collection allows to improve the development of the present research, avoiding the creation of conflicting situations.

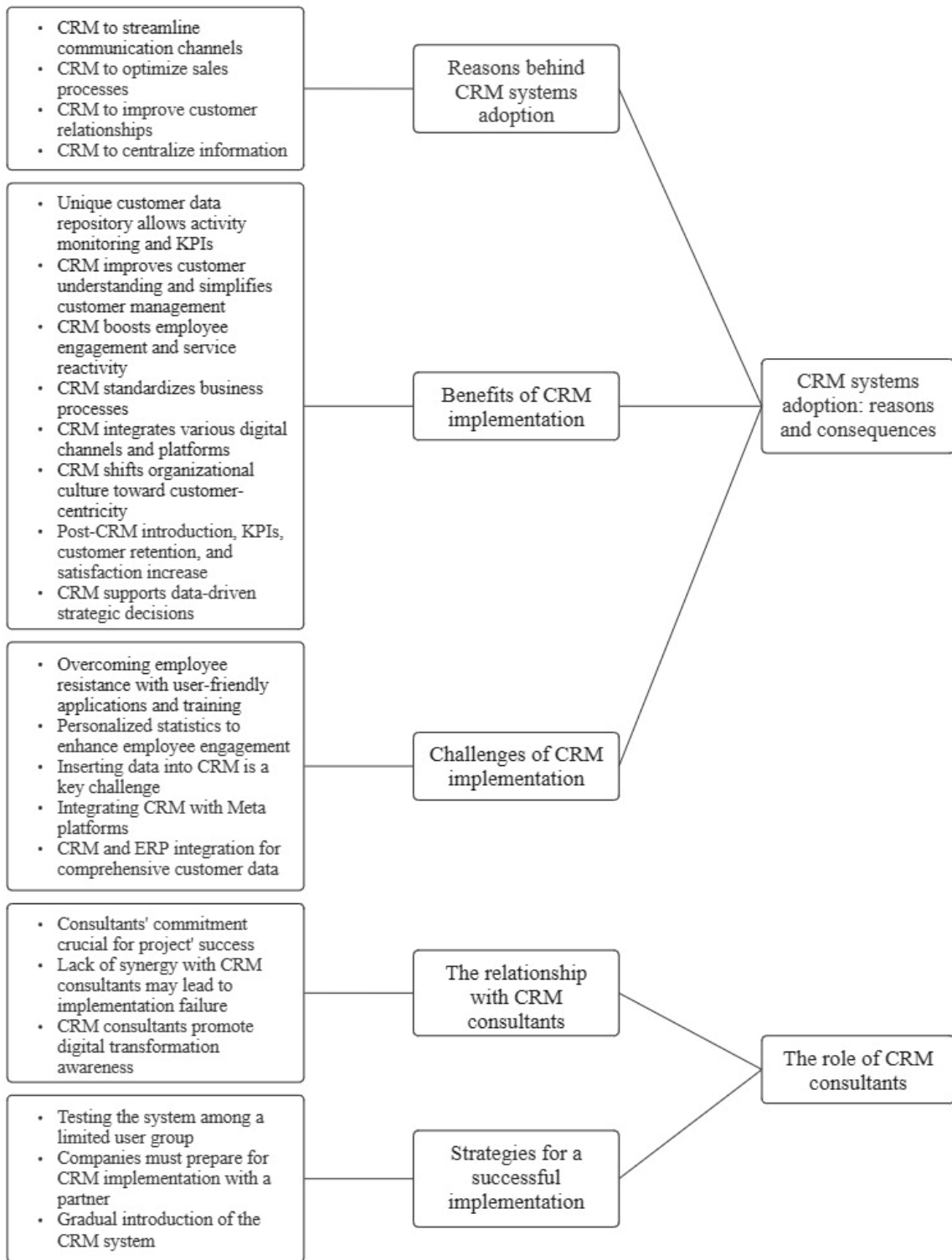
#### **3.3.1.4 Data analysis**

To categorise and consolidate the themes and dimensions pertinent to this study, the methodology introduced by Corley and Gioia (2004) was followed. Following this established methodology, firstly primary data deriving from interview transcripts were closely examined and coded together with secondary data, to identify key categories. The initial list of concepts was further processed to identify similarities and overlaps, resulting in the creation of a set of first order concepts. These first order concepts were labelled in the nearest form to the original terminology used by study's informants. Subsequently data were further aggregated and abstracted to create second-order themes and aggregate dimensions.

The result of this process is presented in Figure 3.11, reporting the coding structure adopted and grounding the study's perspective to the empirical evidence. A list of four final aggregate dimensions emerged, labelled "Customer-centric approach and vision", "Digital transformation's effects", "CRM systems adoption: reasons and consequences", "The role of CRM consultants". Appendix 3 reports representative quotations related to meaningful conceptual themes and dimensions.

Figure 3.11: Coding structure





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## 3.3.2 Qualitative findings

### 3.3.2.1 Case description

To preserve the exploratory intention and capture a variety of firms' strategies and experiences, firms with different levels of prior knowledge of CRM systems were selected for the interviews in the qualitative cross-case analysis. Below, companies are briefly described.

#### *Company A*

Company A is specialised in the production of ready-mixed concrete and bituminous conglomerates within the BtoB market. It operates in a vast territory that includes the regions of Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna and Lombardia. Production is managed through 71 strategically located production plants scattered across the territory of north-eastern Italy. Through its production plants, the company serves an extensive clientele comprising approximately 8,000 customers, represented by construction companies of various sizes, ranging from very large multinationals to small local companies. The specific nature of the business sector requires a very close and ongoing relationship with customers, as continuous construction projects are frequent. The company's distinctiveness is driven by a critical product requirement: the concrete must be deployed within 90 minutes from the moment of its production. This requires a very fast and efficient service, by optimising the machines in order to have no waste and to provide the minimum of customer waiting time. In the initial months of 2023, the company introduced for the first time a CRM system, tailored to meet the company's needs and operational procedures.

#### *Company B*

Company B is a prominent BtoB wholesaler in the agricultural and gardening industry since its establishment in 1983. Its extensive product catalogue includes a wide range of offerings, among which plant protection products, fertilisers, seeds and covers for professional and do-it-yourself cultivation, for edible and ornamental plants. The company's customer base comprises traders and producers in the agricultural sector, fostering direct and highly interactive relationships. The company needed to replace its previous CRM system and introduce a new one that would easily integrate with the Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP) and other tools dedicated to managing lead generation and nurturing activities. Moreover, to further improve sales processes and customer service, the company successfully implemented a BtoB e-commerce portal.

### *Company C*

Company C is a furniture chain that currently has 22 sales points located throughout Italy. Specialising in the sale of home furnishings, the company places a distinct emphasis on customised furniture solutions. Operating as a dealer, Company C, relies on an extensive array of suppliers, each contributing to the production of unique and customised product lines. Sales take place exclusively offline in physical shops, with no online distribution channels. However, in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the company underwent a transformative shift, moving all promotion and lead generation activities in the digital environment. Approximately 12 years ago, the company introduced for the first time a CRM system in order to support call centre activities. Over the past year, the company has progressively expanded the utilisation of the CRM system to encompass other departments and functions within the organisation. This evolution culminated in a comprehensive diffusion of the CRM system, allowing the analysis of the entire customer journey, from initial engagement to the ultimate purchase within the physical stores.

### *Company D*

Company D belongs to a big holding company active in the entire design furniture supply chain. Founded in 1959, the company specialises in providing home furniture solutions not only to end consumers, but also to designers and architects who include products in their private and contract projects. With more than 200 stores all over the world, presents a widespread distribution of the Brand. The company has the mission to convey a sense of transparency and to establish profoundly intimate relationships with its customers, based on trust, and above all on the desire to create a long-lasting relationship over time. Over the years, the company has accumulated a vast experience with CRM systems, becoming familiar with user interfaces and functionalities of different CRM solutions.

### **3.3.2.2 Customer-Centricity in the Digital Era**

During the discussion of the importance of customer relationships with interviewed companies, each of the interviewees highlighted a greater commitment to customers, in line with the emerging theme of customer-centricity. In this regard, a representative of Company D said, “*we have chosen to have a business of total transparency and create a very close relationship with our customers, based on trust, based above all on the desire to create a lasting relationship over time*”. All companies expressed a strong and widespread willingness to create a very close and long-lasting relationship with customers, based on trust and shared values. In fact, the role

of corporate values is recognized as key in attracting and retaining customers, as values contribute to a company's credibility and perception. Companies are committed to clearly communicating values that are aligned with customers' needs and vision, with a constant focus on conveying the transparency and authenticity of the business. As a consequence of the customer-centric approach, companies are now privileging one-to-one interactions, which allow them to build a customised relationship with each single customer based on individual behaviours. At the same time, businesses are fostering a human-to-human approach, which means, according to Kotler *et al.*, (2021), that human beings have a priority over products and profits, and this is fundamental to achieve business goals<sup>6</sup>. According to interviewed companies, digital technologies are very useful in this field, as they can effectively favour personalised and one-to-one relations or interactions, at the same time the physical aspect of relationships still holds paramount significance. The importance of in-person interactions in BtoB markets has already been discussed in the previous chapters, and interviewed companies confirmed the necessity to maintain physical touchpoints during the customer journey, independently of the type of consumer market. In other words, digital interactions can only support customer relationships, without entirely substituting in-person exchanges.

Discussing with the technology provider the shift towards a more customer-centric vision that companies are facing, one significant difference between BtoB and BtoC sectors emerged. In fact, according to the provider's perspective, it was observed that BtoC companies have a well-established track record of prioritising customer care, whereas BtoB markets are dealing with a more evident transformation towards customer-centricity. In this transformation BtoB companies want to get closer and closer to the final consumer, even when the latter is not a direct purchaser, in order to better understand the final market's demands and expectations, and consequently increase performance. For instance, in contemporary BtoB contexts, companies are strategically emphasising brand awareness, with the aim to engage with not only their immediate customers, but also the final consumer. This is a response to the growing reliance of individuals on digital platforms and channels for pre-purchase research on products and services, that makes customers more and more informed. Consequently, BtoB businesses are generating content and disseminating information tailored to end consumers.

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<sup>6</sup> Kotler, Philip, Waldemar Pfoertsch, and Uwe Sponholz. *H2H marketing: The genesis of human-to-human marketing*. Ed. Maximilian Haas. Cham: Springer, 2021.

Table 3.7: Factors highlighting a greater commitment to close and long-lasting relationships - own elaboration.

<b>Greater commitment to create a close and long-lasting relationship with customers</b>
> Communication of shared corporate value that enhance trust
> Focus on one-to-one interactions
> Promote human-to-human approach
> Enhance proximity to the end consumer

### **3.3.2.3 Adapting to digital transformation: business processes, relationships and communication**

The advantages and opportunities brought forth by digital transformation have already been discussed in the previous chapter. This section presents the effects of digital transformation on business processes, customer relationships, and communication that companies faced during the transitional phase towards digitalization. To commence, it is worth noting that all interviewed companies mentioned that the process towards digitalization positively affects the entire organisational structure by, for example, reorganising the communication between resources among the entire organisation. The systematic digitalization of all the collected information enables the establishment of a structured and digital system, thereby leading to the standardisation of processes. The creation and acknowledgment of standardised operations yields two main outcomes for interviewed companies. First, it simplifies internal processes making them more accurate and clearer, as it leaves no space for the ambiguity inherent in information interpretation. As confirmed by a representative of Company B, that said *“technology has also simplified internal processes because everything is clearer and more precise. The information is available to everyone, it is clear, it does not have to be interpreted, and so we have been able to break the process down into different activities entrusted to different people, which was complicated before because the exchange of information between one person and another took too long”*.

Secondly, it facilitates rigorous activity monitoring and assessment. These dual effects synergistically contribute to mitigate errors, reduce processing time and enhance coordination. However, digital transformation can foster not only intra-firm coordination, but also with regard to the entire supply chain, or ecosystem as already discussed previously.

The enhanced efficiency brought by digital transformation also impacts relationships with customers. Exploring the changes in customer relationships resulting from the impact of digital

transformation, the central emphasis remains on the improvement of customers' conditions. Rapid processes and interactions are becoming increasingly paramount, since individuals are constantly connected via social networks and other digital platforms. Individuals' connection evolved in the past years, moving from a mere entertainment connectivity to a functional connectivity, highly used by individuals to be informed and to benefit for online services. In this regard, companies highly value customers' hyperconnection, which is a precious source of information that must be exploited in order to rapidly and better understand their needs and desires. They recognize the power of technologies in making relationships much smoother and rapid, since information is digitalized and immediately available, greatly accelerating response time to customers. In this way, digital technologies fostered efficiency, improving the quality of services offered to customers. This aspect emerged especially from a representative of Company B who said "*these technologies have mainly resulted in a lot of efficiency, and as a consequence, it has greatly improved the level of service we offer to the customer. The relationship is faster, more precise and consequently more efficient than before*". Businesses must adapt to these changes, and they are making responsiveness and immediacy their strategy to respond to customer needs and differentiate themselves from competitors. Indeed, responsiveness has a twofold origin, it is a differentiating factor that companies can achieve thanks to technology, and at the same time a customers' expectation. In fact, customers require very fast responses and services from companies, and they must adapt to meet customers' expectations.

Moreover, in order to enhance customer service, companies are embedding digital technologies such as AI in business processes. For instance, Company C declared that it is planning the adoption of an AI-driven robot that will be able to welcome customers inside the showroom, in the event that all salespeople are employed.

For what concerns communication, companies affirmed that the emergence of novel digital platforms reshaped how companies engage with their customer base, devolving to traditional e-mails a secondary role compared to before. The significance of an online presence manifests as a dual imperative, compelling both companies and customers. On one hand, customers anticipate the digital presence of companies as given, while on the other hand, companies find it imperative to establish a digital footprint to effectively satisfy their customers' evolving needs. Companies' online presence involves a variety of digital channels, including instant messaging systems (e.g. WhatsApp or Messenger), as well as social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Facebook) that offer companies different avenues through which to engage and interact with their customers. In contrast to the past, where communication in digital platforms

was unidirectional and relatively common to all platforms, nowadays companies need a more adaptive approach. Each distinct platform or system requires a tailored method of engagement and involves bidirectional communication.

Moreover, companies are responding to the proliferation of digital platforms by fostering a certain flexibility in the choice of communication methods. Businesses are evolving to accommodate customers' preferences by enabling the use of multiple channels, with the aim of eliminating any barriers that can lead to potential communication challenges. In this regard, a representative of Company B said *“we are removing all the barriers that can bring communication difficulties. And so yes, from a communication point of view, what we are trying to do is to allow customers to use whatever channel they like, and we adapt to their way of communicating. So, we provide as many tools as we can to meet the customer's needs”*.

Nevertheless, the abundance of digital channels gives rise to integration challenges among these different avenues that require constant monitoring, prompting companies to seek a solution for centralising all information into a unique repository. Company C expressly emphasised this difficulty: *“we searched unsuccessfully for a platform that would allow us to centralise all these technologies in one place, without having to switch between tabs in the browser all the time to keep up with customers”*.

As a consequence of the discussed changes and organisations' successful adaptation to them, companies reported that they observed a noticeable increase in customers numbers and conversion rates, attributable to the integration of digital technologies and digital strategies.

Table 3.8: The effects of digital transformation on business processes, customer relationships and communication – own elaboration.

<b>Digital transformation's effects</b>	
Business processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Improved organisational structure</li> <li>&gt; Simplification of processes</li> <li>&gt; Monitoring of activities</li> </ul>
Customer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Enhanced efficiency and speed of interactions</li> <li>&gt; Embedding AI in customer service</li> <li>&gt; Enhanced customer service</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Flexibility in communication methods</li> <li>&gt; Integration challenges among channels</li> <li>&gt; Tailored communication</li> </ul>

### 3.3.2.4 CRM systems adoption: reasons and consequences

Subsequently, the qualitative analysis focused on investigating the adoption of CRM systems within companies, highlighting the motivations behind their introduction and consequences arising from their implementation, particularly in terms of challenges and implications for firms. Regarding the motivations for the introduction of a CRM system, companies mentioned a wide range of reasons. This suggests that the decision to implement such systems is subjective and can differ according to several factors, such as industry, organisational structure, internal challenges and much more.

As previously discussed, this study highlights the integration challenge that exists among the different communication channels. This challenge has been identified as one of the reasons behind CRM solutions adoption. Organisations find in CRM systems the solution for collecting in a single place all the information deriving from different interactions with customers. In this way, any information is immediately available and visible. Conversely, another company declared that the initial introduction of the CRM system was limited to call centre operations, and subsequently it underwent a progressive expansion throughout the entire organisation. This broader implementation enabled the company to optimise and analyse the complete workflow, from lead generation to customer conversion. Despite the diversity in reasons for adopting CRM systems, a shared objective unites these implementations: the willingness to create a closer and improved relationship with customers. This shared goal is confirmed by the representative of Company D, which said *“CRM in this sense becomes a fundamental tool to not only be able to know exactly who our customers are, but also to segment them in the best possible way and to address our customers with solutions designed at the precise moment in which they find themselves, before the need arises”*.

Independently of the initial introduction purpose, CRM systems can impact positively on companies in countless ways. A deeper examination of companies' experiences with CRM systems implementation reveals two main categories of impacts: internal to the company and external towards customers. Consequently, CRM systems increasingly become a facilitator benefiting both internal stakeholders and customers themselves.

In terms of internal implications, the adoption of CRM applications implies a significant transformation in the organisational culture and approach, indirectly leading to a more customer-centric organisation. Company B particularly expressed the new organisational approach by saying *“as a result, however, we are bringing more customer focus into the company, without seeking it, because the software is made for the customer. All the information that people are uploading into the systems is to make sure that it gets to the customer nice,*

*clean, and useful, so yes, we are indirectly bringing the customer a little bit more to the centre”.*

This transformation is defined as indirect because the introduction of such software is frequently driven primarily by the pursuit of greater efficiency, rather than a primary objective of enhancing customer focus. The shift towards customer-centricity is thus an indirect, but very important, outcome of the adoption.

Among other effects, companies declared that they experienced an enhanced employee engagement, as a direct result of CRM solution adoption. This increase in engagement can be attributed to the possibility for employees to visualise their own dashboards with personal performance indicators, thus they are able to understand if they are performing well or not and adjust their strategies accordingly. At the same time, this enables companies to foster a culture of increased transparency and meritocracy within the organisation, a key driver of employee engagement.

Moreover, as previously discussed, technology plays a pivotal role in streamlining processes and facilitating continuous activity monitoring, with CRM systems serving as an exemplar of this phenomenon. Each company agrees that these software solutions enable the achievement of a certain degree of homogeneity in business processes. Standardisation also exerts an influence on operational timelines by accelerating sales processes and reducing response time both within and beyond the organisation. Furthermore, the consolidation of all the information into a single repository enables in-depth analysis, allowing the calculation of the most relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with the aim to monitor and assess organisational performance. As a result of this function, interviewed companies reported a notable enhancement in their KPIs. Moreover, the availability of a large volume of data within the CRM system associated with data analysis capabilities of the software, empowers organisations to strategically operate based on analytics. These systems are able to analyse both aggregated data as well as delve into more and more detail, even up to the individual customer. In this way, companies can analyse customers' information and subsequently plan precise strategies and operational plans based on analytical and strategic criteria. According to Company D, every action undertaken by a customer holds immense value for any enterprise. In the absence of a system capable of reading, interpreting and securely storing this information, the company essentially operates in a state of sensory deprivation, without a defined strategic course or any actionable directive.

It is worth mentioning that companies recognize that a successful CRM solution implementation requires a seamless integration with the ERP system, coupled with user-friendly accessibility for employees, particularly through the utilisation of mobile devices.

Equally important for an effective functioning is the integration of the CRM application with the different digital platforms and online channels, such as social media or marketing automation platforms. The significance of integration cannot be underestimated, as any shortcomings in creating a seamless environment jeopardise the overall success of the project. The thesis will delve deeper into the complexities of integration and other challenges in subsequent sections of the study.

Shifting the focus to the external implications, particularly those that directly affect customers, there is a widespread improvement in the relationships between companies and their clientele as a result of adopting CRM systems. These systems are recognized as an essential tool for gaining a more profound understanding of customers, facilitating their segmentation, allowing companies to address customer needs, often pre-empting those needs before they even become apparent. This efficiency is facilitated by the comprehensive incorporation of the customer's complete historical data within the CRM solution. As anticipated before, the implementation of CRM systems results in reduced working times, which means lower response times to customers' requests, and an overall improved responsiveness in customer service. An improved customer service, consequently, contributes to an elevated customer experience, fostering greater trust in the company from the customer's perspective. When all these individual factors are taken into account collectively, they significantly contribute to consolidating customer retention rates and elevating overall customer satisfaction levels.

Table 3.9: Internal and external implications of CRM systems adoption – own elaboration.

<b>The implications of CRM systems adoption</b>	
<b>Internal implications</b>	<b>External implications</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Customer-centric culture and approach</li> <li>&gt; Enhanced employee engagement</li> <li>&gt; Streamlining processes</li> <li>&gt; Monitoring of activities</li> <li>&gt; Data-driven strategic decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Improved customer relationships</li> <li>&gt; Augmented responsiveness to customers</li> <li>&gt; Elevated customer experience</li> <li>&gt; Greater customer's trust</li> </ul>

Despite the numerous advantageous implications associated with the incorporation of a CRM solution, intertwined companies mentioned two main broad challenges: employees' resistance to changes, and integration challenges. The first one, extensively explored in the existing literature, is the resistance exhibited by employees towards change, identified with the concept

of technology turbulence by Chatterjee *et al.*, (2022). Pretending individuals to deviate from their usual procedures and embrace a completely new system can be challenging, even more when it comes to switching from a manual to a digital action. Regardless of the level of digital proficiency of employees, whenever a firm introduces a new system or technology, the employees often resist its implementation. For instance, in the case of Company B, a relevant challenge was persuading employees to actively enter and record information into the system, instead of simply memorising them. A change in the vision of the entire organisation is needed, and employees need to recognize that information holds significant value and that a proper organisation is essential to make it beneficial for the entire workforce. All the interviewed companies recognize the essentiality of training initiatives in order to facilitate a seamless transition towards the adoption of a CRM system. It has to be noted that a company classified as an experienced user in this context (Company D), affirms that current CRM applications have evolved to be user-friendly and intuitive, significantly mitigating the risk of employees' resistance to change. Conversely, the other companies recognize technology turbulence as an unavoidable and relevant challenge to face. Their strategy to effectively guide employees through this adaptation is entirely based on continuous training activities, since digital transformation is an ever-evolving process. Moreover, discussing the present topic with a CRM systems provider, a successful strategy frequently employed involves initially introducing the new system to a limited group of employees, typically those who are the most proactive and adaptable. After this swift test phase within the group, the system is then progressively introduced to the rest of the workforce. This approach helps in acclimating employees and reducing resistance to change, contributing to a smoother CRM system adoption process.

The second main challenge, already briefly anticipated above, pertains to the integration of the CRM solution with already existing systems or platforms. To ensure a successful implementation, it is imperative to integrate the CRM application with, for example, ERP systems and digital platforms. This integration enables the filling of the database with essential information required to obtain a comprehensive view of the company. As an example, Company B reported that they have successfully achieved a full integration of the CRM system with the pre-existing ERP software. As a result, they are able to operate with real-time, continually updated data sourced from the ERP system, such as warehouse capacity, issued invoices, and orders.

### 3.3.2.5 The role of CRM consultants

Technology providers, or CRM consultants, seem to play a key role in the complex phase of integration. Their role is to assist in integrating the CRM system with other software applications, such as email marketing platforms, e-commerce systems, or accounting software. The role of these partners is to help customers implement and optimise CRM systems, accompanying them during the entire period of use of the software. The entire process starts with the assessment and analysis of the client's business model and processes. Thanks to the creation of the workflow of business processes, consultants analyse how customer data is collected, stored and used. During the implementation phase, consultants assist developers in order to align the configuration of the software with the client's business processes and requirements. According to the type of software to be implemented, consultants can tailor the CRM system to the specific needs of the business, by creating custom fields, workflows, and automation rules. Once implementation is complete, CRM consultants train employees on how to use the system effectively, by ensuring that the staff understands the software's features and benefits. However, once the system is up and running, CRM consultants may provide continuous support and maintenance services, including updates, system improvements, or additional training.

The present section includes insights gathered from discussions with the interviewed companies that rely on a CRM consultant, and the technology provider offering consulting services.

First of all, interviewed companies recognize the importance of partnering with a competent and reliable partner. Furthermore, the choice of the partner has a critical influence on the success of the project, as companies declare that a lack of synergy with the consultant can lead to implementation failure. As an example, Company B affirms *“we bought one of the best known CRMs on the market, but after three years we abandoned the project because we could not create a good synergy with our supplier. We did not understand each other, nothing ever worked as we expected it to, so we just could not use it”*.

According to the provider's perspective, companies that are approaching a partnership with a consultant must take into consideration three preparatory steps: choice of the right partner, being convinced of the investment, and being conscious of their business processes. The most common situation that providers are faced with is the customer's lack of detailed knowledge of its business processes, leading to constant variations and extended start-up times.

On their side, technology consultants must actively involve the customer company in a transformation process that encompasses the entire organisational culture and approach. For a successful implementation of the system the presence of digital skills, and a shared vision

towards digitalization is crucial. Providers can pursue this goal by undertaking awareness-raising initiatives aimed at promoting digital transformation in general, and more specifically within the realm of CRM systems. Obviously experienced consultants have designed their own strategies for a successful implementation. One strategy has already been described above, a gradual introduction of the software among a limited pool of employees. Another strategy is the progressive digitalization of the company, without aiming for full digitisation from the first stage.

Table 3.10: Factors for a successful CRM system implementation – own elaboration.

<b>Factors for a successful CRM system implementation</b>
> Synergy between the company and the consultant
> Competent and reliable partner
> User involvement in organisational transformation
> Implementation of proven strategies

### **3.4 Limitations of the study**

Despite the considerable efforts made and the adoption of recognized empirical research methods, this study still exhibits certain limitations. The first limitation pertains to the restricted number of firms and industries represented, in fact the number of respondents to the survey is not sufficient for the purpose of reporting statistically significant considerations. Another constraint is the reliance on single or a few informants from each company involved in the qualitative research, the incorporation of input from additional informants would have enhanced the depth and comprehensiveness of this study. Consequently, this hinders the ability to draw broad conclusions from this research. However, it is important to highlight that the empirical investigation was intentionally designed to prioritise diversity among cases. Another limit is represented by the non-investigation of the actual use of the CRM system among companies that declared to have one. It is not sufficient to implement a CRM system, but it is important that companies effectively and efficiently use the solution, exploiting the collected information through data analysis, not stopping at mere data visualisation.

The specific topic of Customer Relationship Management is considered very emerging and relevant. This research reveals the growing interest in CRM systems adoption, expectations and satisfaction, and the importance of the role played by CRM consultants, who represent a precious resource for a successful CRM system implementation.

### 3.5 Discussion

The findings emerged and presented above, encompassing both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, prompt the exploration of different insights. This is particularly significant when we consider the convergence and divergence of findings from the two distinct research methodologies, quantitative and qualitative.

First of all, the quantitative research shed light on the prevailing trends in the adoption of CRM solutions, revealing that companies primarily favour three distinct categories: international, proprietary and cloud-based systems. The four interviewed companies adopted an Italian, proprietary and in-cloud system, reflecting two out of the three preferred characteristics. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the significance of this observation may be tempered by the fact that these organisations all rely on the same Italian CRM provider, and thus software. Furthermore, when asking in the quantitative analysis interested companies about the factors deterring the adoption of CRM systems, they highlighted a need for support to initiate the adoption process. This confirms the pivotal role of CRM partners in facilitating the transition to CRM solutions, which emerged from the qualitative research. Companies rely on these partners not only for product expertise, but also for guidance in overcoming the initial hurdles that can be associated with CRM implementation, such as data migration, customization, and employee training. In conclusion, empirical evidence suggests that the presence of competent CRM consultants can significantly influence the decision-making process for companies considering the adoption of CRM solutions.

The themes of integration and easiness of use emerged particularly from the quantitative analysis, whose relevance is confirmed also in the qualitative one. The integration of CRM systems with other platforms is essential, and it is apparent that companies recognize integration as both a challenge and a requirement for the success of the project. Without an adequate level of integration, companies are not able to take full advantage of the benefits deriving from CRM systems adoption. Moreover, surveyed companies expressed a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the current state of system integration, possibly attributed to the high flexibility in communication channels identified from the qualitative perspective. In this context, it becomes evident that CRM partners play a crucial role throughout the entire implementation phase, particularly in terms of achieving seamless system integration. Their expertise and support are essential in ensuring that CRM systems effectively integrate with existing platforms, thus optimising potential advantages.

For what concerns ease of use, the quantitative research reveals an inclination towards easy and intuitive Graphical User Interfaces (GUIs), probably in order to simplify the use of the system to employees. In fact, in the qualitative analysis it has become evident that employees' resistance to changes represent a prevalent and significant challenge that organisations face. To overcome this, user-friendly software coupled with training activities proves to be a valuable asset in facilitating the transition and enhancing users' acceptance.

In the quantitative analysis businesses selected several functionalities currently offered from their CRM applications. These functionalities are in line with the outcomes of the implementation of CRM solutions mentioned by interviewed companies, in particular: the possibility to immediately display customer information, simplification of workflows, management of sales, and improvement in internal communication. The alignment between the outcomes reported in the qualitative analysis and the commonly recognized functionalities of CRM systems underscores the effectiveness and practicality of CRM systems in meeting business needs.

Moreover, the quantitative analysis delves into companies' expectations concerning the advantages offered by CRM systems. These expectations closely align with the actual advantages experienced by interviewed companies, in particular with reference to the increase in customer service and satisfaction, improvement in corporate performance, and enhanced customer retention. Consequently, it can be concluded that potential future users of CRM systems clearly recognize the positive impact of CRM systems adoption. In addition, the experience of companies that have already adopted a CRM system could prove relevant for companies that are considering adoption, serving as an example of success.

Although the benefits of CRM systems implementation are widely acknowledged, the scope and functionality of these systems seems to differ among companies, according to their level of familiarity with such solutions. Specifically, enterprises that already adopted CRM systems tend to view the software as a significant asset in improving and managing customer relationships. Conversely, the quantitative analysis reveals a distinct perspective among potential future CRM users, who predominantly perceive CRM systems as tools primarily geared toward overseeing day-to-day operational tasks, with less emphasis placed on their role in nurturing customer relationships. The contrasting views on CRM functionality might indicate a need for enhanced awareness and education regarding the multifaceted benefits that CRM systems can offer. Companies considering CRM solutions adoption might not be fully aware of the potential capabilities these systems can offer for customer relationship management.

The qualitative research reveals another contrasting perspective by highlighting the importance of data analysis in shaping strategic decision-making processes. This observation appears to be in contrast with the quantitative findings, from which emerges an underestimation of data analysis activities, prevailed by the mere visualisation of customers' information. This aspect should be further investigated as it could lead to several considerations. One potential contributing factor could be the differences in research methods employed. It is widely recognized that qualitative research delves deeper into individuals' experiences and perspective, whereas quantitative research often employs structured surveys that might not capture the nuances of qualitative insights. Another explanation could be represented by a discrepancy between how organisations perceive their data-related activities (as revealed in the qualitative research) and how they actually put them into practice (as revealed in the quantitative data).

Comparing actual findings with the existing literature presented in the first two chapters, it is possible to observe several key points of alignment and divergence. Findings reaffirms some previously established principles while also uncovering novel insights that warrant consideration and further exploration.

In particular, findings confirm the consensus within the literature that BtoB marketing is evolving, shifting from a transactional to a relational approach. Companies recognize the importance of building lasting customer relationships based on transparency and trust, rather than focusing solely on one-time transactions. Moreover, companies are effectively experiencing the benefits deriving from relational marketing and proposed by the literature, such as decrease in uncertainty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), increase in customer satisfaction (Abdul-Muhmin, 2002), higher loyalty (Verhoef, 2003), and superior financial performance (Boles *et al.*, 2000). Within the objective of increasing customer satisfaction, the empirical analysis confirms that companies are adapting to offer a great customer experience, considered by the literature as an emerging theme. Nowadays customers evaluate suppliers taking into account the total experience, rather than judging single transactions (Ulaga, 2018), and companies are highly aware of it. The customer experience is influenced by a growing number of interactions, and customer interactions increasingly occur in digital spaces. Moreover, empirical analysis attributes to customers' hyperconnection a significant role in shaping relationships. Similarly, the existing literature affirms that digital technologies impact markets and societies by promoting continuous connectivity and new forms of interactions (Corsaro and Anzivino, 2021).

However, empirical research introduces a different perspective on the prominence of digital interactions. While prior studies revealed that digital relationships have become a dominant mode of creating value for BtoB companies, from the empirical investigation emerged that digital interactions play a complementary rather than substitutive role alongside digital in-person interactions, in particular within the BtoB context. In other words, empirical evidence suggests that in BtoB contexts digital interactions, while significant, do not currently entirely replace traditional face-to-face interactions. Instead, they act as valuable support, enhancing the overall ecosystem of relationships.

The digital realm significantly influenced the dynamics of relationships between companies and their customers, promoting interactivity, immediacy and real-time interactions (Corsaro, 2019), providing highly personalised experiences (Parise *et al.*, 2016), and enhancing trust among customers (Pandey *et al.*, 2020). These changes in relationships due to the pervasive adoption of digital technologies, represent a crucial theme emerging from the empirical discussion, supporting the findings of the literature. The symbiotic effects of interactivity, personalisation, and trust-building mechanisms within the digital realm have reshaped the way businesses engage with their clientele.

Focusing instead on the adoption of a precise digital technology, CRM systems, the empirical evidence concerning the adoption of this type of software aligns with the research background. Results suggest that CRM systems represent a mature and widely adopted technology, with 80% of companies that have a CRM system or are in the process of implementing one. The existing literature presents a variety of advantages and benefits associated with CRM systems, which closely reflect the outcomes identified in the empirical research. A particular emphasis is given to the key areas of improvement, including enhanced responsiveness to customers, augmented customer knowledge, and enhanced customer service. On the other hand, when it comes to addressing implementation challenges, the concept of technology turbulence as conceptualised by Song *et al.* (2005), finds solid support in empirical evidence. Companies perceive employees' resistance to changes as the primary hurdle to overcome during the implementation process. According to the insights collected in empirical analysis, employees can be encouraged in the use of the software by organising training activities and by effectively demonstrating the significant benefits of adopting the CRM system.

Although the literature has relatively underexplored the role of CRM consultants, the empirical evidence reveals some common factors that can contribute significantly to a successful implementation, which include: expertise, reliability and synergy. It is of paramount importance

that the chosen partner possesses a high degree of competences and reliability, as well as the ability to foster harmonious relationships.

These comparisons between findings and the existing literature serve as the basis for a deeper understanding of the impact of digital technologies on customer relationships but also of the complex adoption process of CRM systems, providing practitioners and researchers with valuable insights that can inform future strategies and investigations in this dynamic and ever-changing domain.

# Conclusion

Digital technologies are gradually transforming BtoB markets and companies, with a profound impact on customer relationships. The traditional boundaries of business are blurring as the digital realm expands, however customers continue to be the lifeblood of companies' success. In this ever-evolving landscape, customer relationships are not mere transactions, but are the foundation upon which loyal and lasting relationships are built, extremely important for the BtoB context. The adoption of CRM systems becomes the channel through which businesses can better understand their customers, anticipate their needs, and deliver personalised experiences.

This thesis investigated how digital technologies, and in particular CRM solutions, impact on customer relationships, with the purpose of integrating the academic debate with empirical investigation. The aim of this research was to answer the following research questions: *“What is the impact of digital technologies on customer relationships?”* and *“What is the role of CRM systems, and which are the main advantages and challenges that companies face during the implementation process?”*.

Through a mixed methodology approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, different insights emerged. First of all, CRM systems represent a mature and well-established technology, as 80% of companies have a CRM system or are in the process of implementing one. Although the reasons for adoption highly differ among companies, a shared objective unites these implementations: the willingness to create a closer and improved relationship with customers.

Individuals are constantly and increasingly connected through digital platforms, evolving from entertainment-focused connectivity to a functional one used for collecting information and online services. Technologies have streamlined relationships and processes, making information readily available and response quicker, thereby enhancing service quality. This has led to more rapid, precise, and efficient interactions between companies and their customers. To adapt, businesses are emphasising responsiveness and immediacy to meet customer expectations and gain a competitive edge, and CRM systems have proved very useful in this. The adoption of CRM systems in business offers a multitude of advantages, including the improvement of customer relationships, enhanced customer service, increased efficiency, streamlined processes, and much more. However, to enjoy all the advantages companies necessitates a successful system implementation. The empirical analysis conducted reveals that although 86% of surveyed companies are satisfied with their current CRM system, there

remains room for improvements, particularly in the areas of system integration and ease of use, which significantly influence the success of CRM projects. By exploring with qualitative analysis, the difficulties that companies experienced during the implementation of CRM solutions, two main challenges emerged: integration with other platforms or systems, and resistance to changes among employees. Research findings emphasise the crucial role of CRM partners in supporting organisations to overcome these challenges and facilitating the transition to CRM solutions, which proves to be a complex process.

Despite the extensive efforts and the adoption of recognized empirical research methods, this study exhibits certain limitations. The primary constraint is the limited representation of firms, as the number of respondents is insufficient to derive statistically significant insights. Moreover, the study relies on input from single or few informants within each company; the incorporation of input from additional informants would have enhanced the depth and comprehensiveness of this study.

In conclusion, this master thesis aimed to shed light on the transformative impact of digital technologies on Customer Relationship Management. Companies must align their strategies with the ever-changing demands of a digitally empowered customer base, in order to forge stronger and long-lasting customer relationships. CRM systems emerge as a valuable resource for analysis, planning, management and strategy. Their role transcends mere data storage and customer interaction, they are crucial in designing and executing corporate strategies, ensuring a dynamic and responsive approach to customer-centric operations, and pursuing an enhanced customer relationship management in the digital age.

# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Survey - CRM systems: adoption, utility and expectations

As the survey was intended for a target group of Italian companies, the survey was disseminated in Italian. Find below a translation of the questions that compose the survey.

1. What activity does your company perform?
2. What role do you play within the company?
3. What is the approximate annual turnover of your company?
  - Less than 5 million euros
  - Between 5 and 50 million euros
  - Over 50 million euros
4. Does your company use a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system?
  - Yes, the company already uses a CRM system
  - No, but the company is planning to introduce a CRM system
  - No, it might be interesting for the company but we are not planning any introduction of a CRM system
  - No, the company has no interest in introducing a CRM system
  - I don't know what a CRM is and what it is for

### Section 1: for companies that already use a CRM system

5. Is your company's CRM system an Italian or an International brand?
  - Italian
  - International
6. Is your company's CRM system proprietary or open source?
  - Proprietary
  - Open source
7. Is your company's CRM system cloud-based or on premise?
  - On cloud
  - On premise
8. Which of the following functionalities does the CRM system offer to your company?
  - Customer contact management
  - Optimising internal communications
  - Simplification of workflows within the company
  - Centralised database with customer information
  - Analysis of customer data
  - Visualisation of customer data
  - Sales performance management
  - Sales Forecast
  - Other ...

9. How important are the following features of a CRM system for your company? Rate from 1 to 6 each characteristic. *1=not at all important; 6=extremely important*
- It is easy to use for employees
  - Involves limited costs for the company
  - Allows integration with other systems and software
  - It is cloud-based
  - Offers advanced analysis capabilities such as predictive modelling and data visualisation
  - It can be customised according to specific company and industry requirements
  - In terms of privacy, it meets GDPR compliance standards
  - Offers mobile accessibility for employees
  - Offers solid customer support and training for employees
  - The CRM system provider has experience working with Italian companies
10. Regarding customer service, how important are the following features of the CRM system? Rate from 1 to 6 each characteristic. *1=not at all important; 6=extremely important*
- Help desk
  - Employee training on the use of the CRM system
11. How many different systems or applications do you have to consult within your company in order to have a global view of the customer?
- Only one application
  - Between 2 and 4 applications
  - More than 4 applications
12. Is your CRM system integrated with other business systems or applications? (E.g. ERP, email marketing, instant messaging, telephony, social media, Google Ads, etc.).
- Yes
  - No
- If yes, what kind of systems or applications?
13. On a scale from 1 to 6, how satisfied are you with your current CRM system? *1=not at all satisfied; 6=extremely satisfied*
14. If you could change anything about your CRM system, what would you change?

**Section 2: for companies that are planning to introduce a CRM system**

5. Within what timeframe does your company plan to install a CRM system?
- Within 1 year
  - Within 2 years
  - Over 2 years

6. Will the future CRM system be an Italian or an International brand?
  - Italian
  - International
  - Not yet established
  
7. Will the future CRM system be proprietary or open source?
  - Proprietary
  - Open source
  - Not yet established
  
8. Will the future CRM system be cloud-based or on premise?
  - On the cloud
  - On premise
  - Not yet established
  
9. Which of the following functionalities should the CRM system provide for your company?
  - Customer contact management
  - Optimising internal communications
  - Simplification of workflows within the company
  - Centralised database with customer information
  - Analysis of customer data
  - Visualisation of customer data
  - Sales performance management
  - Sales Forecast
  - Other ...
  
10. How important are the following features of a CRM system for your company? Rate from 1 to 6 each characteristic. *1=not at all important; 6=extremely important*
  - It is easy for employees to use
  - Involves limited costs for the company
  - Allows integration with other software systems
  - It is cloud-based
  - Offers advanced analysis capabilities such as predictive modelling and data visualisation
  - It is customisable to the specific needs of the company and the requirements of the industry
  - In terms of privacy, it meets GDPR compliance standards
  - Offers mobile accessibility for employees
  - Offers solid customer support and training for employees
  - The CRM system provider has experience working with Italian companies
  
11. To what extent are the applications or systems you currently use able to give you a good understanding of your customers' needs? (E.g. ERP, email marketing, instant messaging, telephony, social media, Google Ads, etc.). *1= not at all well; 6=extremely well*

12. How many different applications or systems do you have to consult in order to have a global view of a customer?

- Only one application
- Between two and four applications
- More than four applications

**Section 3: for companies that could be interested in CRM system but the introduction is not currently planned**

5. What are the reasons why your company is interested in a CRM system?

- For potential benefits (in terms of performance, integration, customer satisfaction, etc.).
- Why CRM is a tool with essential functionality for managing day-to-day activities
- For suggestions received from other professionals
- For the curiosity of testing the potential of a CRM system
- Other ...

6. What are the reasons why your company does not currently use a CRM system?

- Why there is no CRM system that meets our needs
- Why the acquisition costs of a CRM are too high
- Why the introduction of a CRM is not a priority right now
- Why we need support to start the process of introducing a CRM system
- Other ...

7. What do you expect from a CRM system?

- Increased company performance
- Increased integration between departments or business units
- Improved service and customer satisfaction
- Improving customer loyalty
- Simplification of internal communications
- Creation of a centralised information database
- Possibility of obtaining detailed analyses
- More ...

8. How important are the following features of a CRM system for your company? Rate from 1 to 6 each characteristic. *1=not at all important; 6=extremely important*

- It is easy for employees to use
- Involves limited costs for the company
- Allows integration with other software systems
- It is cloud-based
- Offers advanced analysis capabilities such as predictive modelling and data visualisation
- It is customisable to the specific needs of the company and the requirements of the industry
- In terms of privacy, it meets GDPR compliance standards

- Offers mobile accessibility for employees
  - Offers solid customer support and training for employees
  - The CRM system provider has experience working with Italian companies
9. To what extent are the applications or systems you currently use able to give you a good understanding of your customers' needs? (E.g. ERP, email marketing, instant messaging, telephony, social media, Google Ads, etc.). *1= not at all well; 6= extremely well*
10. How many different applications or systems do you have to consult in order to get a global view of a customer?
- Only one application
  - Between two and four applications
  - More than four applications

#### **Section 4: for companies that have no interest in introducing a CRM system**

5. Why doesn't your company use a CRM system?
- The economic investment is not justified
  - Not an effective way to manage our customers and potential customers
  - We have tried it in the past but it did not work in our company
  - We are not informed about CRM systems and their potential benefits
  - We don't need it
  - Other ...
6. Does your company have past experience with a CRM system?
- Yes, good experiences
  - Yes, not good experiences
  - No, no experience

If you have had unsatisfactory past experiences, could you kindly share with us the critical issues you have encountered?

7. To what extent are the applications or systems you currently use able to give you a good understanding of your customers' needs? (E.g. ERP, email marketing, instant messaging, telephony, social media, Google Ads, etc.). *1= not at all well; 6= extremely well*
8. How many different applications or systems do you have to consult in order to get a global view of a customer?
- Only one application
  - Between two and four applications
  - More than four applications

## **Final section for all respondents**

In which business activities do you think Artificial Intelligence (AI) is most relevant?

- Customer support
- Data Analysis
- Demand forecasts
- Fraud prevention
- Image and video recognition
- Predicting customer behaviour
- Productivity
- I do not believe that AI is a valid tool for improving business performance
- I have never heard of AI

## Appendix 2: Interview outline for companies

Since all the interviewees involved in this study are Italian-speakers, interviews were held in Italian. A translation of the interview outline is hereby provided and introduced by some theoretical considerations.

*One of the most essential elements companies have to identify while choosing their target market is whether they will communicate to final consumers or to other businesses; consequently, two major types of markets emerge. Depending on the type of consumers a company is dealing with, marketing communication, and strategies in general, holds its own peculiarities (Rėklaitis et al., 2019).*

- Who are your customers and what kind of relationship do you have with them?
- Have there been any changes in the customer relationship in recent years? And what have been the main factors behind them?

*As discussed by Corsaro and D'Amico (2022) the fact that business exchanges and interactions are conducted in digital contexts influence the complex system of relationships among suppliers, buyers and intermediaries.*

- How has technology influenced your customer relationships?

*While implementing CRM systems can yield advantages such as higher customer loyalty, enhanced marketing effectiveness, better customer service and support and reduced costs due to improved efficiency, it is noteworthy that despite the continuous progress and evolution of CRM technology, CRM initiatives often fail to meet expectations (Suoniemi et al., 2022).*

- What were the motivations that led you to consider introducing a CRM system?
- What changes have you noticed since the introduction of CRM? Do you think that your customers also perceived changes?
- What difficulties or critical issues have you experienced, or are you still experiencing, following the introduction of CRM?

*The marketing landscape has witnessed a significant transformation over recent years, influenced by a convergence of factors, such as technological advancements, changing customer behaviour, and the increasing complexity of business relationships. Companies must consider the evolution of what customers seek and what value the most and adapt their strategies and offering accordingly.*

- Do you think that with regard to the topic of the evolution of your customer relationship and the role of CRM in it, there are other important aspects not touched upon in this interview? Are there any important aspects to emphasise for your strategies in the near future?

### Appendix 3: Qualitative Data Coding - Companies' Interview

Representative quotations	First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
La volontà è quella di andare a stringere un forte legame con il territorio e andare ad avere una presenza radicata proprio all'interno del territorio in cui operiamo. Per questo diventa fondamentale andare a, diciamo, incarnare dei valori la cui clientela può riscontrare all'interno dei nostri store e nella condotta nel business model che abbiamo, di fatto abbiamo scelto di avere un business di totale trasparenza e creare un rapporto molto stretto con i nostri clienti, basato sulla fiducia, basato soprattutto sulla volontà di creare un rapporto duraturo nel corso del tempo. (D)	Aiming for strong, enduring customer relationships		
L'evoluzione naturale che si sta compiendo soprattutto nell'ultimo anno è di vedere il cliente nella sua interezza, andando a costruire un approccio come ti spiegavo prima proprio one to one, basato su un approccio human to human, in grado di creare non tanto un gruppo di persone, quindi le famose buyer personas, ma andare a parlare al singolo come singolo. E non di porci come azienda, ma di porci come persona che parla con una persona. (D)	Prioritising one-to-one interactions	Greater commitment to customer relationships	
Comunque, secondo me, le aziende BtoC sono avanzatissime dal punto di vista del customer care, però nel BtoB c'è proprio questo passaggio verso il customer care più marcato. (P)	BtoB moved towards customer care more than BtoC		Customer-centric approach and vision
Prima di tutto l'iper-connessione del cliente, il cliente è costantemente connesso. Se è costantemente connesso noi dobbiamo sfruttare questa sua connessione per riuscire a intercettare i suoi bisogni in maniera più rapida possibile. (...) È cambiato proprio l'uso che il cliente ha fatto della propria connessione, se prima era meramente di intrattenimento, dopo è diventata molto più funzionale per gestirsi proprio la propria vita, per usufruire dei servizi sia delle aziende sia delle istituzioni. (C)	Leveraging hyperconnected customers to grasp their needs quickly	Changes in customers relationships	
Lato social, un altro metodo è stato quello di rispondere veramente a tutti, anche negli orari più impensabili, lo abbiamo fatto in prima persona. Chi ti risponde alle 11 di sera se lasci un commento sotto un post? Noi ti rispondiamo. Ti rispondiamo immediatamente e può fare la differenza, anche rispetto ai competitor. (...). Quindi con una comunicazione più presente, rispondendo in maniera puntuale e veloce, aiutati anche da sistemi di chat bot. (C)	Offering rapid and responsive customer relations		

<p>Le aziende si sono accorte nel tempo che alla fine dobbiamo accontentare il consumatore finale, vogliono arrivarci più vicino possibile, cercano di acquisire anche la filiera. Ha iniziato Luxottica con questo, ad acquisire rivenditori per arrivare il più possibile vicino al consumatore finale e capire le esigenze, perché poi è quello che compra. (P)</p>	<p>BtoB companies seek deeper end customer understanding</p>		
<p>Infatti adesso abbiamo parecchi clienti che stanno facendo brand awareness, fanno capire di più il prodotto sul consumatore finale, ma loro non vendono direttamente al consumatore finale, vendono a degli installatori. Però loro stanno creando un mercato per far capire al consumatore. Perché adesso il consumatore si informa prima di andare a comprare qualcosa. Se io ti preparo delle informazioni, dei contenuti che tu puoi consultare e capire come funziona, poi vuoi anche il mio prodotto. (P)</p>	<p>BtoB companies focus on brand awareness, since consumers are now informed</p>		
<p>La tecnologia ha accelerato molto la velocità di risposta al cliente perché siamo passati da avere poche informazioni digitalizzate nel gestionale, ad accumularne sempre di più e a migliorare gli strumenti. E quindi adesso, quando siamo in real time con una persona al telefono, riusciamo a dare molte risposte. E questo è molto importante perché gli altri non ci riescono, sostanzialmente. Quindi, queste tecnologie principalmente mi hanno creato tanta efficienza e di conseguenza ha migliorato molto il livello di servizio che offriamo al cliente. La relazione, appunto, è più rapida, più precisa e di conseguenza è più efficace rispetto a prima. (B)</p>	<p>Technology streamlines customer relationships, provides instant information, and enhances efficiency in customer service</p>		
<p>Assolutamente la tecnologia, ovviamente, e gli algoritmi che attualmente vi sono anche in versioni open source o che sono allo studio, ti permettono di perseguire sempre di più questo rapporto personalizzato. (...) Hai la possibilità davvero di costruire dei workflow che sono basati proprio sui singoli comportamenti. (D)</p>	<p>Technology supports personalised, one-to-one interactions</p>	<p>Digital transformation's impact on customer relationships</p>	<p>Digital transformation's effects</p>
<p>Quindi vogliamo che il cliente abbia avuto un approccio fisico, sia venuto a trovarci, ci abbia visto e conosciuto personalmente. (C)</p>	<p>Digital interactions complement in-person engagement</p>		
<p>Come ti dicevo riprenderemo probabilmente la presenza nei centri commerciali, con le promoter, e andremo con l'AI. Metteremo un robottino fisico dotato di intelligenza artificiale che andrà a dialogare con i possibili clienti all'interno del centro commerciale, si muoverà all'interno del centro commerciale. Ma anche uno di questi robottini lo porteremo all'interno dello showroom, quindi so che sembra brutto anche tra virgolette, però se tu dovrai recarti da noi e trovi tutti occupati hai a disposizione questo robottino che se gli chiedi "guarda dovrei vedere delle cucine" lui ti dirà "seguimi che ti porto nell'area cucina" e ti seguirà nella scelta eventuale dell'arredamento. (C)</p>	<p>AI aids customer service</p>		

<p>C'è stato quindi un aumento notevole di clienti e di conversione del cliente. (C)</p>	<p>Digital shifts boost customer numbers and conversion rates</p>		
<p>La tecnologia poi ha semplificato i processi interni perché è tutto più chiaro e preciso. Le informazioni sono a disposizione di tutti, sono nette, non vanno interpretate e per cui abbiamo potuto scomporre il processo in diverse attività affidate a diverse persone, cosa che prima era complicato perché, lo scambio di informazioni tra una persona e l'altra richiedeva troppo tempo, e quindi era meglio che una persona seguisse un flusso dall'inizio alla fine. Ma è molto pericoloso, perché in caso di assenza di questa persona, ne va di mezzo il servizio che diamo al cliente e questo non deve succedere. Per cui sì, abbiamo ottenuto una grossa facilità di organizzazione interna, suddivisione dei ruoli e, appunto, di crescita organizzativa. (B)</p>	<p>Digitalization and process standardisation enhance coordination and efficiency</p>	<p>Digital transformation's impact on business processes</p>	
<p>Direi che è diventata anche non solo qualcosa che abbiamo adottato in maniera principale per esigenza, ma credo che sia diventato qualcosa che ormai il cliente si aspetta di più, cioè è molto più fruibile per il cliente ormai il canale digital. Per cui è diventata da ambo le parti un'esigenza comprovata e collaudata. (C)</p>	<p>Digital presence is essential, meeting customer expectations</p>		
<p>Qui [nei social network] il cambio è stato radicale. Considera che mediamente fino a qualche anno fa si utilizzava uno stesso linguaggio per tutte le varie piattaforme. I social principalmente, erano utilizzati anche qui per una comunicazione unidirezionale. Fortunatamente questi cambiamenti sono all'ordine del giorno, stanno avvenendo tuttora. Stanno avvenendo e si parte da sia una comunicazione per singola piattaforma, perché anche la singola piattaforma richiama ovviamente dei target differenziati tra di loro e richiama anche un modo di comunicare differente. (D)</p>	<p>Shift from one-way to two-way social platform communication with tailored methods</p>	<p>The evolution of digital communication processes</p>	
<p>Poi da un punto di vista di comunicazione, noi cerchiamo di essere il più flessibili possibili. Cioè se il cliente vuole comunicare via WhatsApp, riceviamo un messaggio e continuiamo lo scambio via WhatsApp. Se preferisce telefonarci, mandarci email, se vuole utilizzare il portale noi lo accontentiamo. Diciamo che stiamo eliminando tutte le barriere che possono portare difficoltà nella comunicazione. E quindi sì, dal punto di vista comunicazione, quello che stiamo cercando di fare è di permettere al cliente di usare qualsiasi canale gli piaccia e ci adattiamo noi al suo modo di comunicare. Quindi noi mettiamo a disposizione più strumenti che possiamo per andare incontro alle esigenze del cliente. (B)</p>	<p>Companies offer communication channel flexibility but face integration challenges</p>		

<p>Allora noi siamo partiti con il CRM a marzo aprile di quest'anno. L'esigenza fondamentale era proprio questa, che per quanto riguarda il rapporto con la clientela c'erano un'infinità di modi per comunicare con i nostri commerciali. (...) Quindi nel momento in cui ci sono molti modi di comunicare, tante volte non ci si capisce perché ognuno è convinto che le cose siano chiare, ma chi le recepisce invece non le sa leggere nella maniera corretta, è normale. (A)</p>	<p>CRM to streamline communication channels</p>	<p>Reasons behind CRM systems adoption</p>	<p>CRM systems adoption: reasons and consequences</p>
<p>Ci siamo ritrovati quindi ad un punto in cui avevamo la necessità di sostituire il CRM e cercavamo qualcosa che potesse ottimizzare i processi di vendita andando però ad integrarsi con il sistema gestionale aziendale, quindi l'ERP, e con gli strumenti di email marketing. Poi come ti ho già anticipato prima, stavamo finalmente iniziando a porre l'attenzione, non solo verso i clienti, ma anche verso i lead e cercavamo quindi degli strumenti che ci permettessero di gestire le attività di lead generation e lead nurturing. (B)</p>	<p>CRM to optimise sales processes</p>		
<p>Le motivazioni che ci hanno spinto ad avvicinarci al CRM sono legate alla volontà di andare a creare un rapporto sempre più stretto con l'utente per differenti ragioni. Se tu conosci il tuo utente, sai esattamente come comunicare, quali paure il tuo utente può avere, che cosa l'utente vuole, che cosa di fatto c'è la possibilità di comunicare o non comunicare. (D)</p>	<p>CRM to improve customer relationships</p>		
<p>Il CRM in tal senso diventa un elemento, uno strumento, un tool fondamentale per riuscire non solo a conoscere esattamente chi è la nostra clientela, per segmentarla nel migliore dei modi e per andare a rivolgere alla nostra clientela quelle che possono essere le soluzioni studiate nel preciso momento in cui loro si trovano, prima ancora che il bisogno sorga. (D)</p>	<p>CRM to centralise information for an instant visibility</p>		
<p>Poi insomma diciamo che inserendo tutte le informazioni nel sistema siamo questo ci permette anche un monitoraggio accurato delle varie attività. (B)</p>	<p>Unique customer data repository allows activity monitoring and KPIs</p>		
<p>Poi per gli agenti sicuramente c'è stata una semplificazione per quanto riguarda la gestione della relazione con il cliente, gestendo in modo più efficiente le trattative e le vendite dei prodotti. Anche perché la creazione degli ordini e delle offerte la possono fare direttamente nel sistema da qualsiasi dispositivo, possono vedere i listini prezzi o le disponibilità in magazzino, e queste sono tutte cose che accelerano il processo di vendita (B)</p>	<p>CRM improves customer understanding and simplifies customer management</p>	<p>Benefits of CRM implementation</p>	

<p>Ci sono due tipi di cambiamenti apprezzati: lato personale interno poiché tutto avviene in modo più trasparente, cioè vince la meritocrazia. (...) Ci sono dei dati oggettivi che dimostrano o meno la bravura o meno di un nostro dipendente. (...) Perché grazie sempre al CRM puoi costruire delle dashboard con dei dati relativi al loro andamento, quindi vedono loro stessi se stanno andando bene, se stanno andando male, meno bene e via discorrendo. Lato cliente invece c'è un tempo di reazione da parte del personale molto più rapido. Se un tempo arrivava una richiesta di contatto e il contatto doveva essere scaricato, passato ad un'operatrice, L'operatrice doveva chiamare, potevano passare anche diversi giorni. Adesso tutto questo processo avviene in pochi minuti, quindi dal momento che il cliente fa una richiesta, il nostro staff riesce a contattarlo nell'arco di pochi minuti, una decina di minuti in media. (C)</p>	<p>CRM boosts employee engagement and service reactivity</p>		
<p>Il CRM diventa sempre di più un facilitatore sia per gli stakeholder interni, sia per i clienti stessi. Quindi andare in generale verso un percorso che semplifica quelli che sono i processi aziendali, e che permette anche di avere meno libertà del singolo, ma costruire di fatto un percorso su quelle che sono le direttive interne, in modo tale che non vi siano anche poi differenti approcci nei confronti del cliente. (...) Diventa proprio quello strumento che permette di avere una, diciamo una costruzione di processi uniforme definita per tutti e di andare a costruire quel rapporto poi col singolo cliente. (D)</p>	<p>CRM standardises business processes</p>		
<p>Per quanto riguarda i canali, prendiamo ad esempio Whatsapp piuttosto che Telegram, che sono strumenti che fino a un po' di tempo fa non c'erano, e adesso li stiamo integrando proprio per dare uno strumento in più al customer care e customer service per dialogare direttamente con gli utenti esterni, utenti o clienti o fornitori. E quindi velocizzare la comunicazione e dare un servizio aggiuntivo. (P)</p>	<p>CRM integrates various digital channels and platforms</p>		
<p>E il fatto di introdurre CRM e di fare il portale per i clienti mi sta agevolando molto in questo perché, come dicevo prima, cambia proprio la cultura della gestione dell'informazione, adesso le informazioni digitali sono molto precise. I clienti vedono queste informazioni grazie al portale che abbiamo creato legato al nostro CRM e quindi capiscono cosa siamo in grado di fare in modo più semplice. (...) Di conseguenza, comunque, stiamo portando in azienda, senza ricercarlo, più attenzione al cliente, perché il software è fatto per lui. Tutte le informazioni che le persone stanno caricando nei sistemi è per far sì che arrivino al cliente belle, pulite, utili e per cui sì, stiamo indirettamente portando il cliente un po' più al centro. (B)</p>	<p>CRM shifts organisational culture toward customer-centricity</p>		

<p>Quelle che sono le principali miglione le hai sia per l'azienda stessa, quindi un incremento di tutti i principali KPI, da quello che è di fatto sia il ritorno del cliente e quindi un'ottimizzazione anche del costo che si sostiene, dell'investimento che l'azienda fa per la lead che diventa il futuro cliente, sia dà la possibilità di avere di fatto una minore dispersione delle lead e una minore dispersione dei clienti e quindi cercare di aumentare quella che è di fatto la possibilità di trattenere i clienti e di convertirli, sia da quello che è proprio il rapporto che tu crei col cliente, che non si sente più solo un numero, ma si sente proprio una persona coccolata, pensata, e che quindi in quello che è poi la fase di acquisto, diventi tu il primo driver a cui pensa. (D)</p>	<p>Post-CRM introduction, KPIs, customer retention, and satisfaction increase.</p>		
<p>Quelle che sono le azioni di base che ogni utente compie sono oro per un'azienda e in assenza di un sistema in grado di poter leggere correttamente queste informazioni, interpretarle, immagazzinarle e poterle usare di fatto si è ciechi, muti e sordi, quindi si conduce un'azienda senza alcun piano strategico e senza alcuna direttiva. Il CRM diventa in sostanza quello che è un po', la stella polare per i navigatori, perché ti indica la via da percorrere e diventa uno strumento di analisi, di pianificazione, di gestione e di strategia. (D)</p>	<p>CRM supports data-driven strategic decisions</p>		
<p>La cosa più difficile è chiedere alle persone di cambiare procedure o cambiare tipologie di approccio e introdurle in un sistema nuovo. Quindi la parte più difficile è sempre quella di formazione del personale all'utilizzo delle piattaforme o della piattaforma, sia per quanto riguarda la parte tecnica digital, ci sono persone più o meno abili dal punto di vista informatico, ma anche in merito al cambiamento da un tipo di azione manuale a un tipo di azione digitale. (..) Quindi la difficoltà maggiore è proprio la formazione del personale interno e la formazione costante. Perché il CRM se è fermo non serve a nulla. (C)</p>	<p>Overcoming employee resistance with user-friendly applications and training</p>		
<p>Noi per ovviare a questo problema abbiamo fatto sì che l'utente stesso avesse a disposizione delle statistiche in modo essere invogliato ad usare il CRM perché vede così per le proprie statistiche aumentare e progredire, se non lo utilizza le statistiche sono ferme, quindi non vengono popolate. (C)</p>	<p>Personalised statistics to enhance employee engagement</p>	<p>Challenges of CRM implementation</p>	
<p>Le difficoltà principali sono legate ad alcune informazioni che dobbiamo dare a tutto il sistema informativo e quindi di conseguenza al CRM che a volte non riusciamo ad essere puntuali nel produrre e quindi a caricarle nel sistema. Questa è la cosa principale, perché appunto il tema è quello di far cambiare il modo di lavorare di persone molto esperte, molto autonome in azienda, perché dalle loro conoscenze si riescano a trovare strumenti che aiutino anche gli altri. Quindi il problema principale è stato nel cambiamento, non tanto</p>	<p>Inserting data into CRM is a key challenge</p>		

nell'uso di questo strumento, ma nel creare e distribuire in modo adeguato le informazioni necessarie. (B)			
Noi adesso stiamo lavorando con il CRM nell'integrazione del CRM stesso a n piattaforme. Quindi stiamo lavorando per l'integrazione del CRM con tutta la piattaforma Meta. (C)	Integrating CRM with Meta platforms		
Per avere un sistema di marketing automation è necessario che il CRM sia integrato nell'ERP in modo tale che il CRM abbia una visione complessiva dell'azienda e possa effettivamente essere uno strumento a supporto di tutta l'azienda, sia che essa operi in ambito BtoB, sia che operi in ambito BtoC, perché è necessario, ovviamente, che il CRM si popoli di tutte le azioni che l'utente va a compiere indipendentemente da in che fase si trova, indipendentemente da che area aziendale si va a coprire (...). Più dipartimenti devono essere in grado, ovviamente, di operare con la lead avendo delle informazioni integrate, delle informazioni complessive. (D)	CRM and ERP integration for comprehensive customer data		
E devo dire che poi ci siamo confrontati anche lungamente, sia con l'amministrazione, sia con l'ufficio commerciale, con me, con i colleghi, in modo da riuscire ad avere lo strumento così semplice e poco impattante per chi lo utilizza. (A)	Consultants' commitment crucial for project' success		
Abbiamo acquistato un CRM tra quelli più noti nel mercato, ma dopo tre anni abbiamo abbandonato il progetto perché non siamo riusciti a creare una buona sinergia con il nostro fornitore. Non ci capivamo, non funzionava mai niente come ci aspettavamo noi, e quindi non siamo proprio riusciti ad utilizzarlo. (B)	Lack of synergy with CRM consultants may lead to implementation failure	The relationship with CRM consultants	
Un'altra, cosa che abbiamo fatto è stata quella di metterlo in pista e creare quattro cinque account delle persone più dinamiche e metterlo in test con loro, in modo da capire subito quali erano gli aspetti negativi, gli aspetti positivi. (A)	CRM consultants promote digital transformation awareness		The role of CRM consultants
É chiaro che per fare questo devono esserci, se parliamo di cambiamento anche legato alla digitalizzazione, le competenze digitali, la visione delle persone, e le competenze digitali all'interno dell'azienda. E qui siamo ancora un po' deficitari. E poi un investimento per il cambiamento. Nel senso che il cambiamento è nell'introduzione di questi strumenti digitali per avere nuove opportunità. L'opportunità si fa però quando tu si sposti verso il mondo digitale. Infatti, noi facciamo un'attività di sensibilizzazione alle tematiche perché aziende che abbiamo sentito o conosciuto che non sanno neanche cosa sia un CRM. (P)	Testing the system among a limited user group	Strategies for a successful implementation	

<p>La prima cosa è trovare il partner giusto e che sappia consigliare nella maniera giusta, quindi deve essere competente. Seconda cosa deve essere interessata e convinta la direzione, perché se la direzione non è convinta sarà la prima a disattendere l'utilizzo, poi tutto il resto cadrà. Al terzo posto, ma non di minore importanza, deve essere fatto un assessment importante sui processi aziendali, cioè capire: come funzioniamo? Perché nel momento in cui tante volte si apre l'azienda si apre il vaso di pandora. Quindi il primo step è cercare di capire come funzionano i propri processi, definirlo e capendo questo sappiamo anche di cosa il cliente ha bisogno. (P)</p>	<p>Companies must prepare for CRM implementation with a partner</p>		
<p>Allora è importante che il consulente sappia consigliare e accompagnare il cliente anche attraverso queste criticità. Una ricetta che noi adottiamo è quella di uno non voler avere la perfezione, cioè non arrivare al 100% della digitalizzazione ma accontentarsi magari di un 80%, che è già un risultato eccezionale. Seconda cosa, introdurlo un po' per volta, ovvero introdurlo su alcune figure aziendali e poi il resto lo farà l'effetto volano. Parliamo ad esempio degli agenti che sono la parte più ostica, prendiamo alcuni agenti che sono magari un po' più propensi e poi facciamo vedere i benefici. (P)</p>	<p>Gradual introduction of the CRM system</p>		

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