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The soft skills as a drivers of customer service in a sales area

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Abstract

Problem and Objective: This study aims to investigate the soft skills as a driver to customer service. And to see the customer service as an important organization's element. At World Economic Forum in 2019, were raised the following years trends. The main was soft skills. Of the Resource Human's leaders interviewed. 91% mentioned the need to detect, study, and develop soft skills since hiring process. 92% highlighted soft skills versus hard skills (Fleming, 2019) [18].

Experimental Approach: To the research, a questionnaire was applied to 66 managers of the sales area of the automotive distribution agencies. They are the ones who are directly with the employees who offers customer's expected service. The stepwise multivariable regression in SPSS Statistics was used to obtain the results.

Findings and Conclusion: The findings revealed that hospitality, effective communication, and motivation are significant as a driver to customer service. Teamwork and problem solving were not significant.

Keywords: Soft skills, hospitality, communication, motivation, customer service

1. Introduction

Customer service is a differentiator in a highly competitive market, and the human factor is responsible for putting this service into practice (Solnet *et al.*, 2019) [43]. The team members have a number of soft skills that allow them to: generate experiences that the customer wants, increase sales, and promote loyalty towards the organization (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2008) [25]. The service approach in the organization has the purpose of satisfying the needs presented by the customer (Wagner, Hansen, Kristensen, & Josty, 2019) [49]. The service constitutes the fundamental experience where the contact between the organization and the customer occurs, this is known as moments of truth (Carlzon, 1991) [11]. To keep or loose a prospect or customer depends on these interactions. It is necessary for organizations to view customer service as the essential factor where their existence and/or permanence in the market lie (Agudelo & Saavedra, 2013) [3].

Albrecht (1990) [4] proposed the customer service triangle. In which he positions team members as one of the key elements within this model. The team members are those who represent the organization in the customer's experiences (Baker, Amodeo, Krokos, Slonim, & Herrera, 2010) [7]. They are the ones who can cause an emotional connection, a unique bond of warmth and trust. When team members achieve the human touch in the service experience, a competitive advantage of the business is guaranteed (Bowen, 2016; Mody, Suess, & Letho, 2019) [32]. This is how soft skills in team members who are in direct contact with customers require special attention (Faizal, Annual, & Rashidi, 2019) [17]. Heckman & Kautz (2012) [24] quote the Collins English Dictionary in which soft skills are mentioned as qualities that do not depend on the knowledge acquired and are of relevant value in some positions. Soft skills are made up of common sense, the ability to deal with people, a positive attitude, and flexibility (Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, & Cullen, 2012) [36]. Hurrell (2013) [26] defined soft skills as non-technical skills, nor related to the abstraction of reasoning, that is, they are interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, which enhance and improve the performance of team members. They are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors. Soft skills are the intangible and specific skills of the personality that determine the strengths of the leaders, facilitators, mediators, or negotiators of an organization (Savaneviciene, Rutelione, & Ciutiene, 2014) [40]. Those who have them can develop interpersonal relationships, increase job performance, and have better professional prospects (Robles, 2012; Faizal *et al.*, 2019) [39, 17].

Certain universities and studies carried out on executives previously investigated soft skills to find out which of them were important in the labor market. These include, among others: hospitality, teamwork, effective communication, problem solving and motivation (Robles, 2012; Singh & Jaykumar, 2019)^[39, 42]. This article aims to analyze to what

extent soft skills impact customer service. This study was applied in the automotive distribution sector, in team members of the sales area. The verification was carried out through a multiple linear regression. The approach of the model is represented in the figure 1.

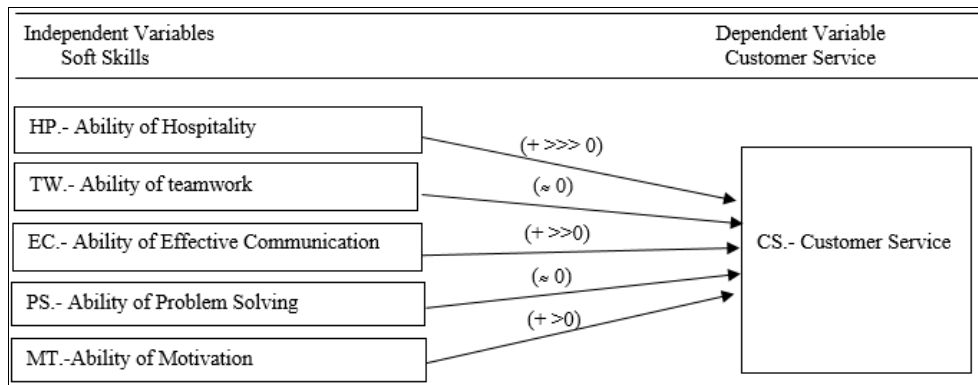


Fig 1: Graphic Model

Source: Own Preparation

From the approach presented in Figure 1, the following hypotheses were established according with different levels of impact defined for each relevant variable:

H₁: HP is the one with the greatest (i.e. >>>) positive impact in customer service.

H₂: TW do not have a significant relevance in customer service.

H₃: EC has a degree of impact on customer service after HP.

H₄: PS do not have a significant relevance in customer service.

H₅: MT has a degree of impact on customer service after EC.

The significance of the study is framed in several aspects: First, in the methodological part since a comparison of models and methods was carried out. This study was applied in the automotive distribution sector, in the team members of the sales area. And finally, the importance of the human factor as the core of the research, in analyzing interpersonal skills in team members and their relationship with customer service.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Literature Review

In this section each of the variables were defined according to the literature found and were the reference to develop the instrument that was applied in the research methodology. Customer service was defined as good treatment, understanding, willingness and determination to support the customer (Vega-Sampayo, Olivero-Vega, & Gastelbondo-Gómez, 2020)^[48]. To provide security, credibility, and trust at the time of interaction (Gonzalez, Frias, & Gomez, 2016)^[22]. The understanding of what the customer expects, in such a way that satisfaction and quality of the service received is offered (Shin, 2021)^[41]. It includes unique interactions for the customer, with high differentiation and generating memorable experiences (Fornieles, Penelo, Berbel, & Prat, 2014; Coste, Lugo, Zambrano, & García, 2017)^[19, 12].

Of the soft skills proposed, the first one was hospitality, which was defined as the attitude of being helpful, empathy,

attention, and warmth of the team member in dealing with the customer (Lolli, 2013; Quinn, 2013)^[28, 38]. Respond to the needs of the customer and satisfy them with professionalism, making them feel like a unique person through friendly treatment (Spowart, 2011)^[44]. The second soft skill was teamwork, which was defined as the ability to collaborate with others in carrying out tasks and achieving common goals for customer satisfaction (Mickan & Rodger, 2000)^[31]. It includes the sharing of information; distribution of tasks, roles, and responsibilities (Torrelles *et al.*, 2011)^[47].

In the tourism, health, restaurant and university sectors, customer service has been highly valued. In these sectors, they have focused on seeking team members with communication and problem-solving skills (Singh & Jaykumar., 2019)^[42]. These soft skills were considered for this study. Effective communication was defined as the ability to listen, ask questions, effectively express concepts, and ideas. Generate an assertive dialogue, using tools and/or methodologies to obtain, understand and appropriately transmit information in different situations with the customer (Coste *et al.*, 2017)^[12]. Problem solving was defined as the ability of team members to identify problematic situations in which it was necessary to respond to customers (Abramson, 2005)^[1]. The ability was integrated by knowing how to clearly formulate the problem, generate alternative solutions, identify the viable solution, and make decisions to implement it effectively and efficiently (Almeida & Benevides, 2018)^[5]. In addition, request the collaboration of superiors or team members if necessary and communicate the resolution of the problem to the customer (Mughal & Shaikh, 2018)^[34].

The fifth soft skill of this study was motivation, it was defined as the degree of effort, enthusiasm, and commitment that team members are willing to exert in their work to satisfy their needs and those of customers (Cerral & Marques, 2009; Navarro Yepes, Ayala, & Quijano, 2011; Haque, M. F., Haque, M. A. & Islam, 2014)^[14, 35, 23]. It is the desire to achieve the task or goal in favor of the customer (Navarro *et al.*, 2011; García & Forero, 2014; Marulanda, Montoya, & Velez, 2014)^[35, 20, 30]. When team members are

motivated by their work, they show kindness, good spirits and provide a quality service that satisfies the customer (García & Forero, 2014; Tampubolon, Murniarti, & Sidabutar, 2021)^[20, 46].

To validate the importance of these variables, a search of each variable in relationship with CS was conducted. Some of these relationships are shown in the table 1. In general, all relationships found from previous research are claiming a

positive impact for customer service; this includes HP, TW, EC, PS and MT as significant explanatory variables with relevant coefficients β 's. On the present work we are going to compare and contrast these results based on the insights obtained on the proposed model. Specifically, we will test that variables TW and PS have a non-significant impact on customer service.

Table 1: Relations between dependent variable (CS) and independent variables.

Authors	Variable	β	Significance
(Martin & Suarez, 2006) ^[29]	HP	.41	0.001
(Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2003) ^[45]	TW	.70	0.01
(Edelman, Brush, & Manolova, 2002) ^[16]	EC	.49	0.01
(Botía & Orozco, 2012) ^[8]	PS	.19	0.01
(Mohd, Kasim, Scarlat, & Muhamad, 2012) ^[33]	MT	.25	0.01

Source: Own Preparation

2.2 Research methodology

After defining the variables, the instrument was developed and applied. The items that made up the instrument were selected and adapted from the empirical studies found in the literature review. Among these instruments analyzed were SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, &

Berry, 1988)^[37], all of them validated with Cronbach's alphas greater than .9. Upon having the first version of the instrument, the content validity was performed with expert Doctors in Methodology and Human Capital. Subsequently, statistical adjustments and expert suggestions were made (table 2) to integrate it into google Forms for its application.

Table 2: Constitution and Reliability of the Instrument

Variable	No. of initial items	Variable No. of final Items	Cronbach Alpha
CS	9	3	.939
HP	9	3	.899
TW	10	3	.944
EC	8	3	.801
PS	9	3	.850
MT	8	3	.884
Demographics	4	4	
Total items without demographics	54	18	

Source: Own Preparation (SPSS Statistics 21)

Parallel to the elaboration of the instrument, the population and the sample were determined. The population of commercial automotive distribution agencies in the Monterrey metropolitan area was 96 (AMDA, 2019; ADANL 2019). The statistical formula was applied for a simple random sampling with finite population $n = \frac{Nz^2(1-p)}{(N-1)e^2 + z^2p(1-p)}$ en donde, $N = 96$, $Z = 1.96$, $p = .9$, $1-p = .1$, $e = .05$. Resulting in an n of 57 respondents, see table 3.

Table 3: Sample

Population Sample	Sample	No. of Surveys Received
96	57	66

Source: Own Preparation

The instrument was sent to each Sales Manager or Coordinator. They are the ones who are closely involved in the operation of the business and establish the sales strategies of the agencies. They are also the ones who know and observe the skills, behavior, and attitudes that Sales Consultants have to offer customer service. The instrument was sent to all sales managers or coordinators of the

population and 66 were received and the data was processed based on this.

3. Results and Discussion

The proposed model for the investigation according to the hypotheses was $CS = \beta_0 + \beta_1(HP) + \beta_2(EC) + \beta_3(TW) + \beta_4(PS) + \beta_5(MT) + u$. The constructs were calculated using the Cronbach's alpha approach, in a confirmatory way. Once the data was obtained. The equation was estimated in SPSS Statistics through successive steps. The Model and ANOVA results were the coefficient of determination $R^2 = .856$, a Fisher test of 116.017 and a Durbin-Watson test of 1.883. Also, can be observed high coefficients β 's of the accepted variables in their impacts on CS. HP $\beta = .500$, EC $\beta = .259$ and MT $\beta = .258$ all of them whit significance $< .001$. The calculated T's values showed relevant levels of significance: HP 5.380, EC 2.740, and MT 3.640. The estimation error of 39%. The multicollinearity diagnosis was 4.02 it's indicated good acceptance range. The results of the model are shown below in the table 4.

Table 4: Model and Method

Models	Method	Incoming Independent Constructs	R2	Accepted Variables	β	T test	Condition Index	FIV
CS=β0+β1(HP)+β2(EC)+β3(TW)+ β4(PS)+β5(MT)+u	Multivariate Regression	HP=HP1, HP4, HP8 TW=TW2, TW5, TW6 EC=EC1, EC2, EC3 PS=PS4, PS6, PS7 MT=MT1, MT3, MT6	0.856	HP MT CE	.500 .258 .259	5.380 3.640 2.740	4.01	3.727 3.864 2.005

Source: Own Preparation

The variables wasn't acetated was the TW and PS whit a β's .013 and .029 the significance was .730, .837, respectively. This according to the hypotheses of Figure 1. Graphic Model.

Finally, HP showed a higher impact than MT and EC. This validated the relevance of this ability in this study. MT and

EC showed similarity in importance, the difference between them was (.001). Table 5 below shows the hypotheses raised and the synthesis of the degrees of impact of the variables towards the CS. Table 5 below shows the hypotheses raised and the synthesis of the degrees of impact of the variables towards the CS.

Table 5: Status of the specific hypotheses according to the results of the model

Independent variables: Soft Skills Result	Result
H ₁₊₃₊₅ : HP > EC > MT Hierarchies of impact towards customer service.	Accepted
H ₂₊₄ : TW, PS Do not have a significant relevance in customer service	Accepted

Source: Own Preparation

The table 6 shows the impact levels of the β's and the significance of this study compared to the β's and the significance of the empirical studies found. In the analysis

of the table, there is only similarity in the degree of impact of EC towards CS.

Table 6: Degree of Impact of the variables towards Customer Service of Model Vs previous studies.

Variable	Theoretical Frame Authors	β	Significance	Degree of Impact	β of the study	Significance of the study	Degree of impact of the study
HP	(Martin & Suarez, 2006) [29]	.41	0.001	3	.500	.000	1
TW	(Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2003) [45]	.70	0.01	1	.013	.837	5
EC	(Edelman, Brush, & Manolova, 2002) [16]	.49	0.01	2	.259	.008	2
PS	(Botía & Orozco, 2012) [8]	.19	0.01	5	.029	.730	4
MT	(Mohd, Kasim, Scarlat, & Muhamad, 2012) [33]	.25	0.01	4	.258	.001	3

Source: Own Preparation

The demographic data of the sales team members for this study were obtained through four items referencing to gender, age, education, and geographic area. Table 7 shows the sum of each of the groups based on the corresponding demographic. When schematizing the results, it was observed in the investigation that the number of men and women was balanced. Also, that team members with an age equal to or greater than 36 years make up 64% and that there is a small number of team members whom their highest level of education is a high school diploma (18%). Regarding the demographic of the geographic area, they

were segmented into two groups, area A made up of Monterrey and San Pedro, which are towns with high purchasing power, and are in the center of the Monterrey metropolitan area. This area is where the largest number of automotive agencies are concentrated. The towns of Cadereyta, San Nicolas and Santa Catarina were in Area B, which are further from the central area. The percentages of groups A and B are those expected according to the concentration of agencies by area, 64% are in the group of area A, that is, in the most suburban and central municipalities.

Table 7: General demographic data

Demographics Groups	Gender		Age		Schooling		Area	
	Men	Women	<36	≥36	≤ High School	≥ Bachelor's Degree	A	B
	66		66		66		66	
N	34	32	24	42	12	54	42	24
%	52%	48%	36%	64%	18%	82%	64%	36%

Source: Own Preparation

The data of each demographic group of the study were processed in SPSS Statistics through multivariate regression with successive steps. The results are summarized in Table 8. For each iteration, the 5 independent variables were included. However, it was observed in Table 8 that the accepted variables were consistent with the significant variables of the model (Table 4), these variables were HP,

EC, and MT. Within the results there were variations of these three variables in the impacts towards customer service according to the group. In most of the demographic results, 2 or 3 variables were significant, only the case of MT education was significant as the only variable for team members with a maximum education degree of high school.

Table 8: Impact of Soft Skills on Customer Service by Groups

Demographics	Group	R2	Self-correlation Tests	Accepted Variables	B	T test	P Value	Condition Index	FIV
Gender	M	0.868	2.327	HP	.488	3.852	0	4.252	4.375
				MT	.211	2.648			1.537
				CE	.285	2.128			3.919
	W	0.847	1.645	HP	.594	4.51	0	2.949	2.687
				MT	.485	3.654			2.687
				CE	.285	2.128			3.919
Age	<36	0.951	2.284	MT	.706	7.356	0	3.472	3.445
				HP	.347	3.942			3.415
				CE	.298	2.202			3.035
	≥36	0.794	1.611	HP	.623	5.117	0	3.191	3.035
				MT	.211	2.648			1.537
				CE	.285	2.128			3.919
Schooling	≤ High School	0.922	2.269	MT	0.92	10.878	0	1	1
				HP	.610	6.305			3.044
				CE	.228	2.446			3.521
	≥ Bachelor's Degree	0.859	2.182	MT	.225	3.103	0	3.697	1.579
				HP	.676	8.180			2.040
				CE	.228	2.446			3.521
Area	A	0.872	2.106	HP	.676	8.180	0	2.459	2.040
				MT	.334	4.005			2.040
				CE	.400	2.260			2.226
	B	0.689	1.317	HP	.458	2.634	0	2.795	2.226
				MT	.211	2.648			1.537
				CE	.285	2.128			3.919

Source: Own Preparation

To verify the impact on CS for each group of demographics, the calculation was performed using a mean difference or t test for each variable. Table 9 shows the hypotheses planted and the result of the calculations. The impact on CS varied depending on the gender; HP, MT, and EC were significant for men, unlike women, who were only HP and MT. However, the impact of both HP and MT is greater in women than in men. EC was significant only in men. In them, EC is in the last position of significance, and implies that their ability to listen and eye contact with the customer to understand and satisfy their needs has an impact on CS, unlike women.

In this study, team members with an age of up to 35 years, the impact on CS is determined by MT and HP. Those who are older than 35 years, the significance is first in HP and then EC. In the age, HP varies in the position of impact, its significance is greater in team members older than 35 years. What reveals that they have a warm and attentive treatment towards customer more accentuated than the younger team members, this is how they impact the CS with this ability? The level of education in the car dealerships of this study,

marked a difference in the significance of MT since it is the only impact ability towards the CS of those who have a maximum High School degree versus the team members with a Bachelor's Degree, this significance was given in three variables (HP, MT and EC), that is, the more academic education they have, the more skills they can put into practice to offer better customer service. The MT has greater significance in team members who have a High School Degree. They have a high drive to achieve their goals and those of the customer, thus impacting the CS.

And finally, in geographical areas, the degree of significance of soft skills in CS also presented differences. In both areas, HP was significant in the first place, however, its impact is greater in area A versus B. EC was significant in less central areas, and MT was significant in area A, which concentrates the largest number of agencies. Demographics Group R² Self correlation Tests Accepted Variables β t P Value Condition Index FIV in area A, team members require greater drive and focus on their goals and those of customers, and in areas B greater communication and attention to what the customer is looking for.

Table 9: Hypothesis tests on impacts by Groups.

Demographic	Group	n	Accepted Variables	β	Typical Error	Hypothesis	T test	P-Value
Gender	H	34	HP	.488	.127	HP _w > HP _m MT _w > MT _m	3.3229 10.0735	.0007 .00001
			MT	.211	.080			
			CE	.285	.134			
	M	32	HP	.594	.132	HP<36 < HP≥36	9.2222	0.00001
			MT	.485	.133			
			CE	.298	.135			
Age	<36	24	MT	.706	.096	MT≤HighS> MT≥Bachelor	26.2264	0.00001
			HP	.347	.095			
			CE	.298	.135			
	≥36	42	HP	.623	.122	HPA > HPB	5.7672	0.00001
			MT	.211	.080			
			CE	.285	.134			
Schooling	≤ High School	12	MT	0.92	0.085	HPA > HPB	5.7672	0.00001
			HP	.610	.097			
			CE	.228	.093			
	≥ Bachelor's Degree	54	MT	.225	.073	HPA > HPB	5.7672	0.00001
			HP	.676	.083			
			CE	.228	.093			
Area	A	42	HP	.676	.083	HPA > HPB	5.7672	0.00001
			MT	.334	.083			
			CE	.400	.177			
	B	27	HP	.458	.174	HPA > HPB	5.7672	0.00001
			MT	.211	.080			
			CE	.285	.134			

Source: Own Preparation

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Through the investigation process, in this article it was possible to comply with the methodological phases as suggested by Creswell (2009) [13] and Whetten (1989) [13]: 1. The establishment of objectives and hypotheses. 2. The literature review to deepen the theory and the establishment of the constructs. 3. The design of the research instrument to collect the information. 4. Data collection and calculation. 5. Obtaining results and conclusions.

According to the automotive distribution sector, customer service is key to influencing the purchase decision. Car dealerships offer similarity in each segment in several domains: products, technology, safety, comfort, and prices. What makes the difference is the treatment of the customer (Díaz, Muñoz, & Duque, 2021) [15]. Customer service, in addition to influencing the completion of the sale, also generates loyalty towards the team members, the brand and the dealership (Gómez, 2011) [21]. Through good customer service, the customer can be brought back for car maintenance or a buyback. Loyalty is generated when customers feel trust with the sales consultant. Advisors need to offer warm treatment during the sales process. Making them feel unique and important. Showing empathy and above all listening to them attentively to be able to interpret their needs and preferences. These last actions occur when the team member has certain soft skills.

The Hospitality (HP), Teamwork (TW), Effective Communication (EC), Problem Solving (PS) and Motivation (MT) are the sales collaborators soft skill's studied in this article to know their impact on customer service. In the literature review, the empirical studies of Martin & Suarez, (2006) [29] on PH with β of .41 were found. Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, (2003) [45] on TW with β of .70. Edelman, Brush, & Manolova (2002) [16] on CD with β of .49. Botía & Orozco (2012) [8] on PS with β of .19 and Mohd, Kasim, Scarlet, & Muhamad (2012) [33] on MT with β of .25, all of them significant. However, the result in this study shows the importance of three key skills in the sales team members. Firstly, that they have the skill of hospitality through an attentive, professional, and warm treatment. Secondly, effective communication through eye contact and active listening that leads them to interpret the needs, likes and preferences of the customer. Thirdly, the team members' motivation to achieve their goals and that they like their activities, in a way that leads them to satisfy the customer. In other words, it is confirmed for the automotive sales sector that the variables of Hospitality (HP), Effective Communication (CE) and Motivation (MT), are drivers of customer service, since relationships are significant and positive. Specifically in direct sales employees.

Using figures and insights reported on table 6, we can easily summarize from previous researches these are reporting significant impacts coming from variables TW, PS and CS. As we discussed on the last section, our results presented on the paper are not getting a significant impact for these variables. There are some underlying reasons why we perceive this difference and apparent disconnection when compared with other author's results. In general, we identify the outcome on this subset of variables (i.e., TW, PS and CS) is very dependent on the underlying business field and management styles of different collaborators when working with specific customers. However, it is suggested to study these skills at the leadership or managerial level in the other areas of the organization.

On the other hand, to complement this study it is proposed to continue deepening in other soft skills such as flexibility, self-confidence, sense of urgency and proactivity in the team members of the sales area of the automotive dealerships. It is also suggested to extend the research to other locations, waiting to see the behavior of the data and variables. Likewise, the section on demographic groups made it possible to build a more precise profile of the sales team members who offer excellent customer service. It is recommended that these profiles and skills are seen in organizations from recruitment. Similarly, a specific training program to develop these skills should be developed for team members who are already part of the organization. Finally, it is proposed to take these studies to other retail sectors in order to analyze the interpersonal skills of team members who are directly in contact with the customer, in order to know the level of impact of said skills on customer service. This in order to offer better customer service. Understanding this as the differentiated of the organizations and the one that generates loyalty, satisfied customers, therefore, the permanence of the organization over time (Kotler, Armstrong, & Zepeda, 2013) [27].

4.1 Situational moment of the Investigation

It should be noted that this study was carried out exactly at the beginning of COVID-19 in Nuevo León, which was at a significant moment in car dealerships. This had an effect not only on individual and collective behavior in the sales process and customer service. But also, before the process of the investigation itself. 44% of the surveys were applied and received before the pandemic, during this period the answer and reception was complicated, the estimated time was 3 to 4 weeks. By having the home office and being more collaborators online, answering and receiving questionnaires was easier. The remaining 55% were shipped and received in a response time of 1-2 weeks.

Regarding the sales process before the pandemic, it was 90% face-to-face, that is, in person. This allowed the collaborator's skills to be put into practice naturally or visually. However, when the surveys were applied, those 90% of employees were making a significant effort to sell remotely and / or digitally. So, the aforementioned skills had to be accentuated. They made them a reality through calls or video calls, the contact with the client had to be closer and warmer, taking care not to overwhelm him (Bullemore-Campbell & Cristóbal-Fransi, 2021) [10].

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