

State of sales

2021 Netherlands Edition



The Netherlands' new **State of Sales**

The state of sales in the Netherlands has been transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report explores just how profound that change has been.

Our data shows that the switch from a sales landscape dominated by field sales teams to one built around virtual selling isn't just a practical necessity resulting from lockdowns and safety concerns. It aligns with a deeper shift in how buyers want to buy. The vast majority of the contacts that sales professionals reach out to are more than comfortable with a remote buying journey. They find the experience of virtual selling more productive and more convenient – and this is changing perceptions about what the role of a salesperson in the buying process should actually be.

Only 13% of buyers in the Netherlands now say that they need to meet a sales professional in person before buying from them. Only 21% say that working remotely has made purchasing more difficult. Twice as many (42%) find the remote buying journey easier – and 62% would like to continue working remotely at least 50% of the time.

With buyers increasingly comfortable navigating buying processes by themselves, sales professionals need to go further to demonstrate the value they can add. Providing fresh, insightful

perspectives elevates the experience of dealing with sales and the value that products and services can deliver. **In fact, 86% of buyers say they are more likely to consider products and services from a salesperson who challenges their way of thinking.**

Sales organisations in the Netherlands are investing in their ability to bring challenging insights to the table by significantly expanding the range of technology that they use. They are doubling down on the use of LinkedIn as both the lead source of sales intelligence and the most effective channel for outreach. And they are exploring ways to leverage greater value from their existing customer relationships.

All of the salespeople in our State of Sales survey have succeeded in hitting their quota over the past year. However, we also identify a group of top-performing sales professionals who have exceeded quota by 25% or more. Comparing the responses of these top performers to their peers helps to illuminate the approach to sales that fit best with this new selling landscape. This includes leaning on LinkedIn as the most effective channel for reaching out to prospects – and forming a closer and more productive partnership with marketing that helps to cater to digital buyer journeys.

The key trends

#1 Selling is now virtual by default

42% of buyers in the Netherlands want to make purchase decisions remotely - and closing deals means embracing a new sales process

#2 Keeping up means going all-in on sales tech

Sales organisations are investing in more tech tools, using them far more often, and giving LinkedIn the stand-out role in virtual selling.

#3 Buyer-first needs to be a sales philosophy – not just a tactic

It's the only way to close a growing gap between buyer and seller priorities.

#4 Buyers want to be challenged by trusted brands

Sales organisations have recognised the need to align with marketing on brand trust – but they need to ditch cold calls for intelligent challenges.

#5 The digital sales landscape makes data the differentiator

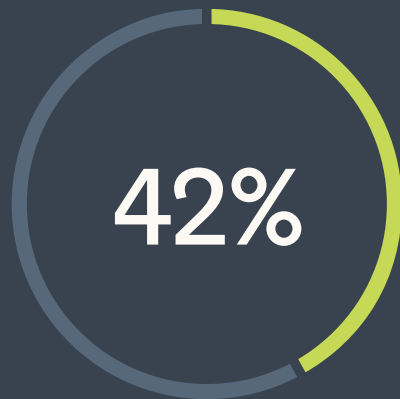
Sales Operations is taking the lead as organisations seek competitive advantage in their data.

#6 Diversity provides a crucial competitive edge

A diverse organisation, and the challenging thinking it drives, are crucial for making the shortlist.

Trend #1

Selling is now virtual by default

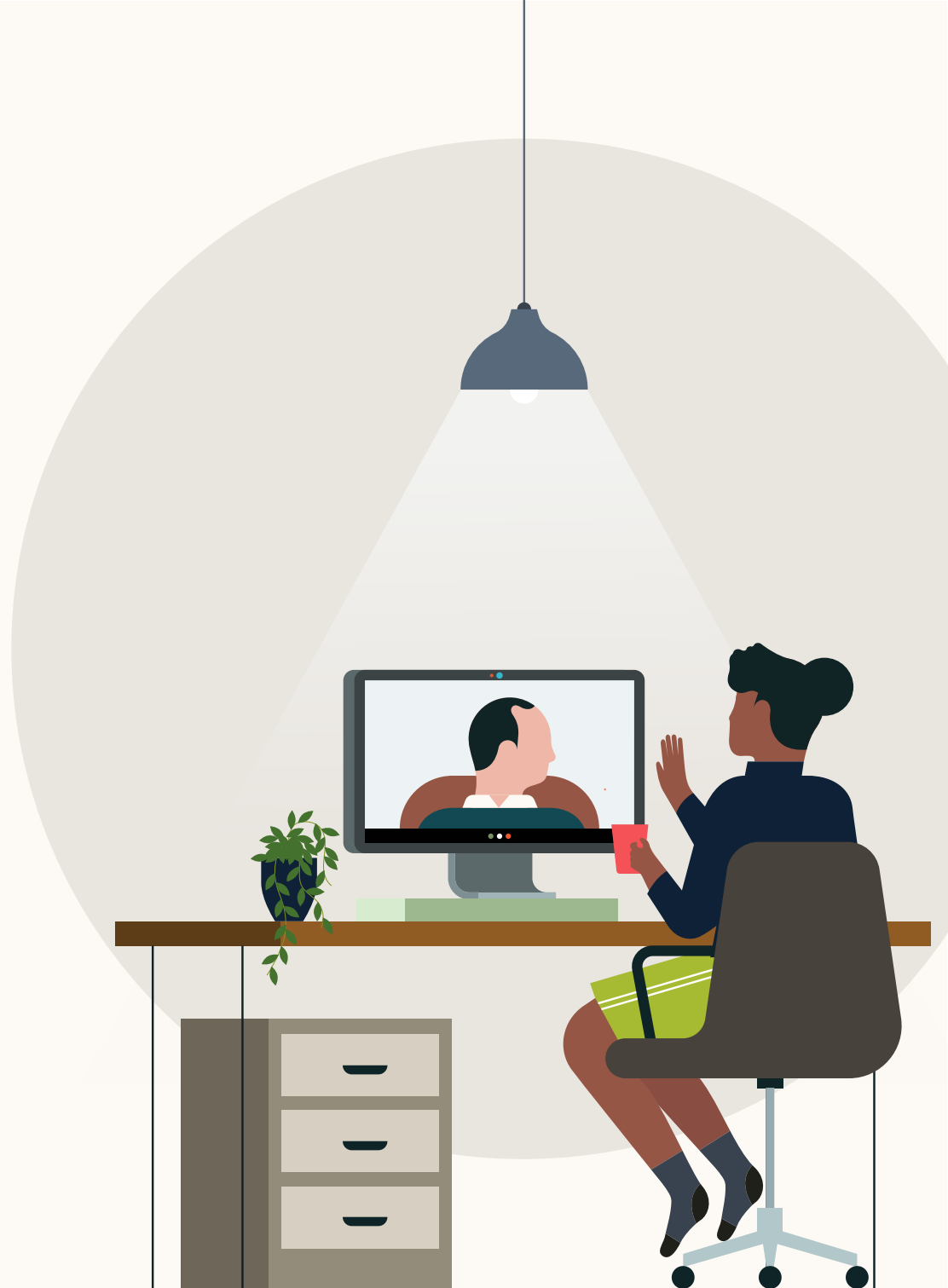


of buyers in the Netherlands
say that remote working
has made purchasing
decisions easier

Selling is now virtual by default

Virtual selling may have started out as an act of necessity. However, it has quickly evolved to be the first choice of buyers – and an experience they will continue to demand long after the pandemic.

Buyers are finding remote purchasing easier, more productive and more convenient than experiences built around face-to-face meetings. They're in no rush to return to seeing sales professionals in-person – and sales organisations have been quick to redesign the way they operate in response.

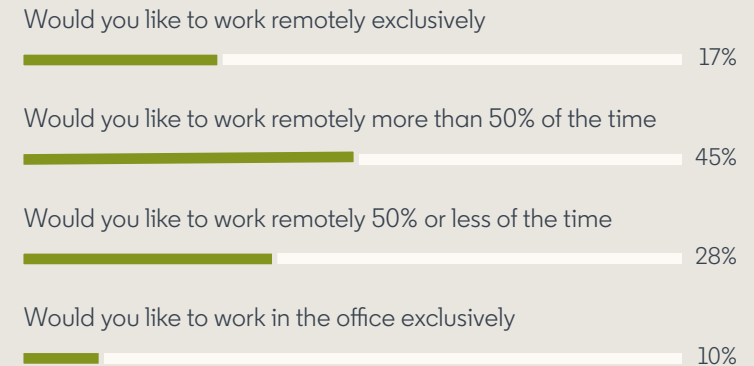


Buyers are planning a future of remote buying experiences

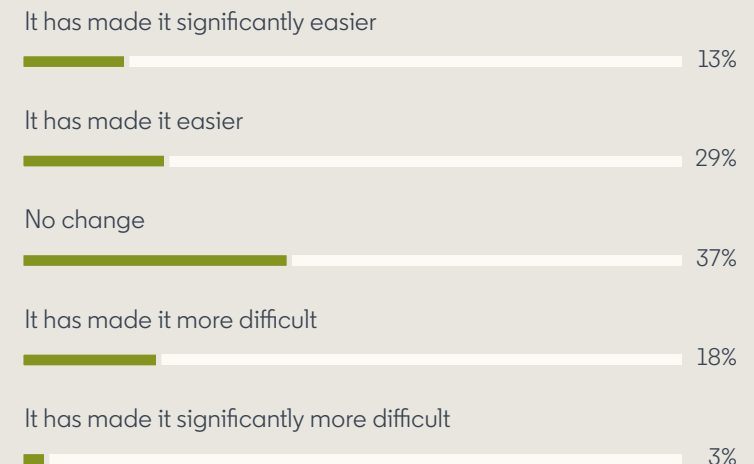
Only 21% of buyers report that working remotely has made it more difficult to make purchasing decisions. Twice that many (42%) report that it's made buying decisions easier. Whereas, before the pandemic, only 44% would have considered buying from a salesperson they'd never met face-to-face, 60% say they're happy to do so now – and will do so beyond 2021. The size of a deal is likely to make little difference to whether a handshake is required: 57% of buyers say there was no limit to the size of deals they were prepared to close remotely in 2020 – and 45% anticipate no such limit going forward. This is backed up by the experience of sales professionals themselves, 51% of whom say they've landed deals of €83,000 or more without ever meeting the buyer in-person.

This fits with how most B2B buyers would like their broader working routines to change, with 62% saying they want to work remotely 50% of the time or more. With hours in the office deliberately reduced, meeting sales reps face-to-face may never return to being standard practice.

What is your attitude towards you working remotely?



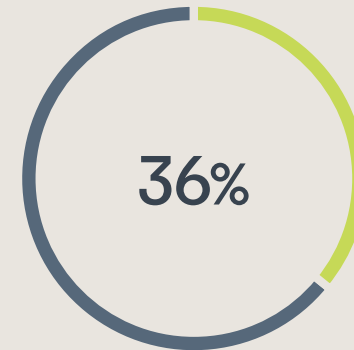
How has working remotely impacted your ability to make purchasing decisions?



Organisations have re-ordered their sales processes

Sales organisations in the Netherlands are responding by building new capabilities into their teams, changing the way that they hire for sales roles, and doubling down on their most valuable forms of outreach. For most salespeople, this means making greater use of their existing customer relationships – and greater use of LinkedIn.

The pandemic appears to have had less impact on the time that salespeople in the Netherlands spend selling than it has on their peers in the UK. The average Netherlands sales professional now spends 36% of their time actively selling, whereas in the UK this has dropped to 28% - the equivalent of half a day less per week. There's some evidence that, prior to the pandemic, the sales process in the Netherlands already put more emphasis on social media research prior to approaching prospects, and leveraging existing customer relationships for introductions. This has enabled a smoother adjustment to a virtual selling world.



Sales professionals in the Netherlands spend 36% of their time actually selling on average.

Trend #1

We can see this adjustment in the actions that salespeople routinely follow before making contact with a prospect. The most common tactic of all is following the prospect company's activity on social media, with 66% doing this most of the time and 32% always doing so. Close behind is research with a salesperson's existing professional network, which 67% do so most of the time – and 23% all the time.

When the time comes to reach out, salespeople in the Netherlands take a noticeably different approach to their peers in the UK. They are far less likely to depend on cold calls and emails. Instead, they put their faith in customer referrals and connecting on LinkedIn, the two outreach techniques with the highest conversion-to-opportunity rates. **Top performers who exceed their quota by 25% or more are even more likely to pick connecting on LinkedIn as the most effective form of outreach, with 38% doing so.** Sales teams in the Netherlands also make greater use of InMail and messaging on LinkedIn, and rate virtual events as a highly effective source of opportunities.

We asked Dutch sales professionals how they gather sales intelligence on prospective clients



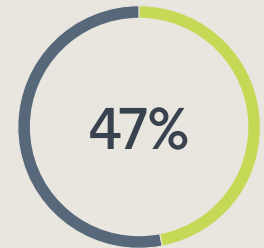
Despite some challenges, remote selling is here to stay

In the Netherlands, the pivot to virtual selling has accelerated some sales trends already in motion, and the use of channels that were already familiar, especially to the most effective salespeople. This helps to explain why, even though remote selling has resulted in challenges, those challenges have felt less severe than in countries like the UK and North America. Fewer than half of salespeople in the Netherlands describe the experience of selling remotely (44%) and managing remote teams (41%) as more challenging than they expected. Although this is still significant, it's around a third less than those in the UK who found the challenge greater than anticipated.

Now that virtual selling is established, the Netherlands shows little interest in turning back the clock. Worldwide, the percentage of paid jobs that are remote working positions posted on LinkedIn grew 5.7x from March to December 2020. In the Netherlands, that percentage grew 7.1x, the fourth highest in Europe (behind the UK, Austria, and Luxembourg). Whereas only 25% of sales professionals worked remotely 50% of the time or more prior to the pandemic, 42% now anticipate doing so during 2022 and beyond.

The challenges and opportunities created by digital buyer journeys can't be met through investing in sales tech alone. Sales organisations also need to invest in capabilities outside the sales team itself: support in tapping new sources of intelligence, planning more effectively, building longer-term relationships and enabling buyers to engage on their terms.

The Netherlands has recognised these new requirements – and responded. Almost half (47%) of sales organisations are hiring more sales operations professionals, while 43% are adding more customer service reps and 40% are investing in expanding their sales enablement roles. LinkedIn hiring data shows that, over the last year, the number of sales operations roles has grown 2.7x faster than traditional sales roles.



Almost half (47%) of sales organisations are hiring more sales operations professionals



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Trend #2

Keeping up means going all-in on sales tech



of sales professionals in the Netherlands say sales technology is important to closing deals

“More and more, we’re seeing account managers using Sales Navigator strategically from a relationship management perspective. It helps them map out their most important clients and follow what’s going on.”

Jorrit Drieënhuizen,
Digital Marketing and Sales Specialist, Centraal Beheer

Trend #2

Sales organisations in the Netherlands are ramping up their investment in sales technology to an extent never seen before. Over a third (37%) say they've responded to the challenges of the last year by adding new sales technologies to their stack – and the same proportion expect their business to increase investment in tech again over the next year, with 20% anticipating growth in spend of 50% or more.

The sales tech revolution is just getting started.



More sales tech tools, used more often

As a result of this investment, salespeople have access to more tech tools, and are making greater use of them. Virtual collaboration, CRM and sales intelligence tools are all used by 40% of salespeople or more. Sales planning (37%), sales engagement (31%) and sales enablement (28%) tools are increasingly familiar parts of the sales landscape as well. Over 50% of salespeople expect to increase their use of every type of tool over the next year.

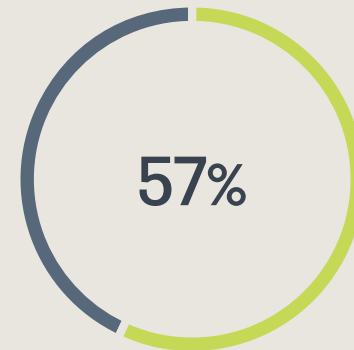
Sales coaching tools have emerged to take on a vital role in the pivot to virtual, and are now used by 21% of sales professionals, with 20% expecting to grow the use of them significantly over the next year.

Sales professionals in the Netherlands told us what sales technologies they use regularly:



Virtual selling runs on LinkedIn

Sales intelligence tools play a crucial role in virtual selling – and in the Netherlands, sales intelligence has become synonymous with LinkedIn. LinkedIn is rated as the most used source of sales intelligence by salespeople in the Netherlands, chosen by 57% of respondents. The vast majority of those using LinkedIn leverage the specialist sales intelligence tools of LinkedIn Sales Navigator. In addition, almost half (48%) of sales professionals choose LinkedIn as the best source of unique data for informing sales strategy, more than any other source.



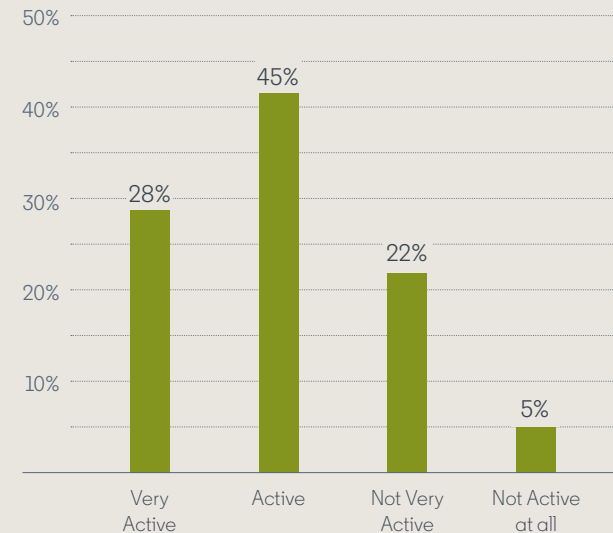
of salespeople in the Netherlands use at least one LinkedIn product for sales intelligence research.



The expanding role of LinkedIn for sales

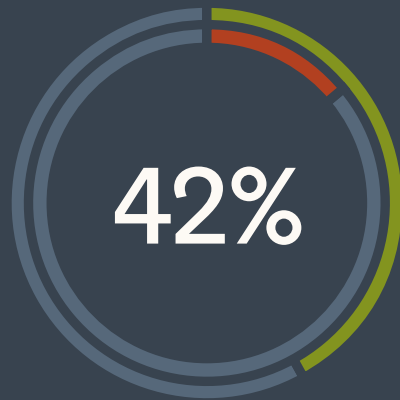
The need to prospect, reach out and build relationships virtually means that LinkedIn is taking on an expanded role at every stage of the sales process. It's now the most actively used social platform for sales activity, with 73% of salespeople describing themselves as active on it, and 28% as very active. These sales professionals recognise the value of expanding their LinkedIn networks. They are also sharing more content from their business, with 25% saying they now share much more than they did before the pandemic and a further 24% planning to share much more going forward.

When asked how active they were on LinkedIn, salespeople in the Netherlands said:



Trend #3

Buyer-first needs to be a sales philosophy –
not just a tactic



of salespeople in the Netherlands say they always put the buyer first, but only 14% of buyers agree

Trend #3

Overall, buyers in the Netherlands have a positive perception of the sales profession: 86% agree that the sales professionals they deal with are consultative, 82% say they are well informed about their business, and 80% describe them as trusted advisors. In general, 54% of buyers have a positive impression of salespeople, and 15% have a very positive one.

A large element of this goodwill comes from the focus that sales organisations in the Netherlands have on the long term. Buyers expect engagement beyond the sale, with 39% agreeing that sales is focused on building long-term relationships. Salespeople expect to close deals through their ability to provide strategic counsel to buyers they work closely with – and through personal recommendations from existing customers. In fact, they consider both of these factors more important than price or even value.

Sales professionals in the Netherlands told us what they thought was the most important factor in closing deals

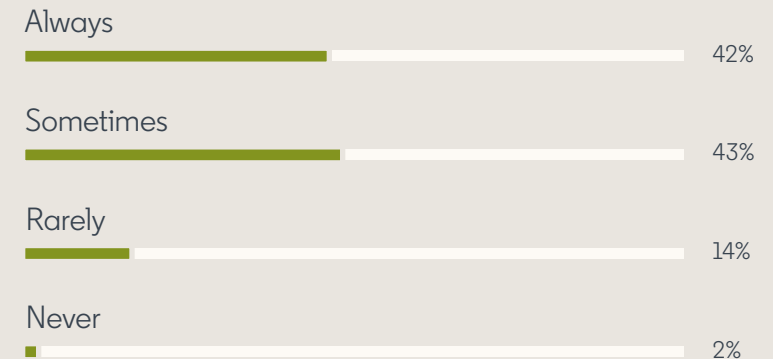


The buyer-first disconnect

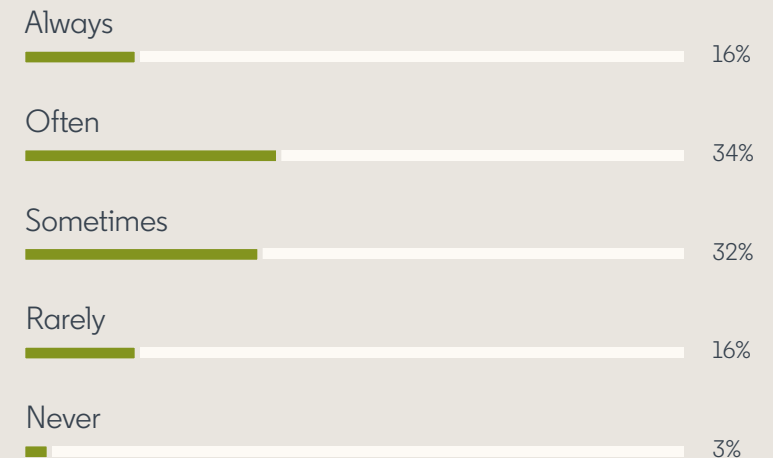
However, sales organisations' investment in existing customer relationships hasn't yet translated into a sales process that puts the buyer first before they become a customer. In fact, buyers and salespeople have very different perceptions of whose interests the sales process is focused on. Despite the fact that 42% of salespeople in the Netherlands claim they always put the buyer first, only 14% of buyers agree that this is what happens all the time. There's a clear disconnect between how salespeople interpret their approach to engaging prospects and closing deals – and how buyers themselves feel about it.

The buyer-first disconnect

To what extent do you as a salesperson put the needs of your buyers organisations first?



To what extent do you as a buyer feel salespeople place your organisations needs above theirs?



As remote selling becomes more established, it's increasingly important for salespeople to signal that engaging with them adds value. Demonstrating that the sales process is being designed around their needs is the most effective way of doing so.

LinkedIn has identified five principles of true buyer-first selling that help to signal that a salesperson is committed to adding real value throughout the sales process:



Learn, then define

Active listening is a critical foundation for the buyer-seller relationship.



Share readily

Buyer first selling is about transparency and always empowering buyers with information.



Solve, don't sell

A buyer first seller measures success in problems solved, as well as products sold.



Deliver value

It's critical to see the relationship through, long after a deal is signed.



Earn trust

A buyer first seller develops long-term trusted relationships by always acting in the buyer's best interest.

Trend #3

Based on these principles, we have identified six selling behaviours that come together to create buyer-first experiences. By asking both buyers and sellers about how often these happen, we can pinpoint the main disconnects that sales organisations need to address:

- ✓ Providing free and easy access to product reviews and other content
- ✓ Being completely transparent about pricing
- ✓ Staying actively engaged after the sale to ensure value delivery
- ✓ Recommending different products/companies if your product doesn't fit the buyer's needs
- ✓ Aligning with buyers on their success metrics related to the purchase
- ✓ Offering product tests, training and trials



Trend #3

The problems come in practice. By salespeople's own admission, their organisations don't apply buyer-first principles as a consistent philosophy. And buyers agree. They report that fully buyer-first sales approaches are even rarer in reality than salespeople believe them to be.

This means that salespeople have to battle against buyers' existing preconceptions to convince them that they are prepared to put their needs ahead of their own. Those that are able to do so stand out all the more. They are better able to engage new prospects remotely – and build more of the enduring relationships that sales in the Netherlands depends on.

Salespeople in the Netherlands identify a range of barriers that their organisations will need to overcome in order to apply buyer-first consistently as a methodology. These include practical issues such as a lack of training (36%), inadequate coaching (34%) and a lack of the right skills (32%), but also broader organisational ones. Over a third (34%) say that choosing not to put the buyer first stems from a focus on meeting short-term revenue goals. Buyer needs are often de-prioritised amid growing pressure to close deals.

We asked buyers and sellers about their experience of the 6 activities that reflect buyer-first principles.

■ The % of sellers saying they **always** apply this behaviour

■ The % of buyers that say they **consistently** experience this behaviour



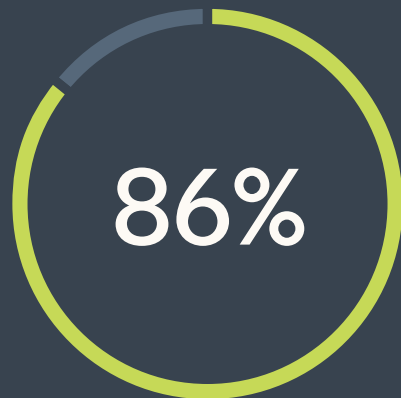
A starting point for buyer-first philosophies

There are signs that sales organisations may be ready to adjust their approach, with 43% of salespeople saying their organisation is measuring sales processes and outcomes in different ways. The investments that businesses are making in customer service roles will help sales organisations to stay engaged beyond the deal, and provide ongoing value to buyers.



Trend #4

Buyers want to be challenged by trusted brands



of buyers in the Netherlands say they're more likely to consider a brand's products or services if the salesperson challenges their way of thinking

Trend #4

In times of disruption and change, buyers want to deal with salespeople who have fresh perspectives to offer. A large majority (86%) of buyers in the Netherlands say they're more likely to consider a brand's products or services if the salesperson challenges their way of thinking. However, only 33% say this often happens – and only 9% say that they experience it very often.



Challengers wanted

Deals close when brand awareness and trust come together with relevant expertise. This adds perspectives and ideas the buyer acknowledges they wouldn't have arrived at themselves.

Positioning themselves as informed challengers is one of the most important ways that salespeople can secure a valued role for themselves as part of a more independent buyer journey. However, there are a range of factors which get in the way of this happening.

Salespeople who share misleading information are the most common factor undermining quality sales conversations, cited by 46% of buyers as the number one reason for disqualifying a salesperson from consideration. Close behind are a lack of understanding of the salesperson's own product (36%) and the needs of the buyer's company (35%). Sales professionals consistently underestimate the negative impact that these behaviours have. Worryingly, only 22% acknowledge the damage done by sharing misleading information.

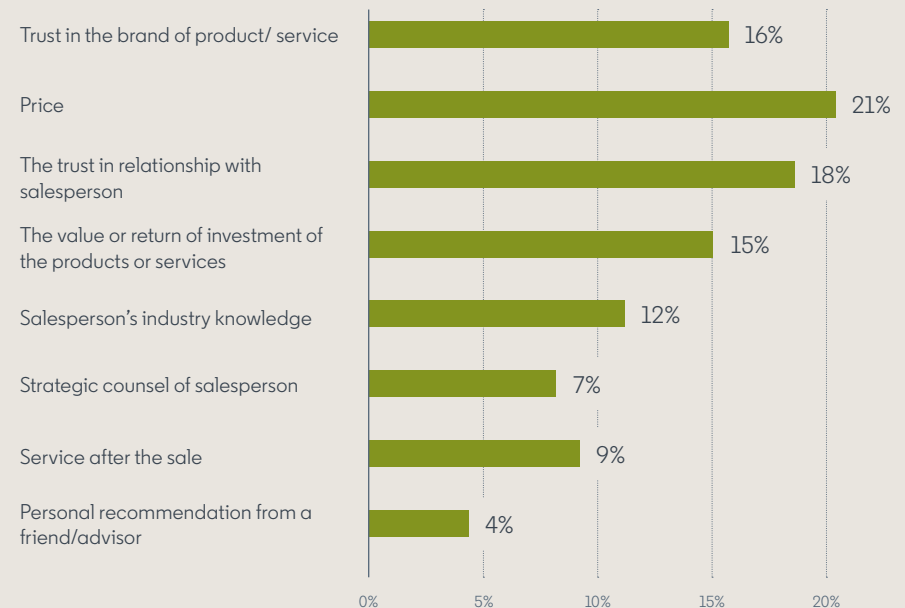


Rebuilding the partnership with marketing

Brand trust is another often overlooked factor influencing whether a challenging, informative sales conversation can take place. A digital, self-directed buyer journey involves prospective clients engaging more with marketing content – and the strength of the brands that salespeople represent starts to exert a greater influence as a result.

Almost half of buyers choose trust in a brand as one of the top three influences on their decision to purchase, which is more than choose trust in the salesperson themselves. Over a quarter of salespeople acknowledge that a lack of brand awareness is a barrier to deals closing – and 30% of buyers agree, citing lack of brand trust as an issue.

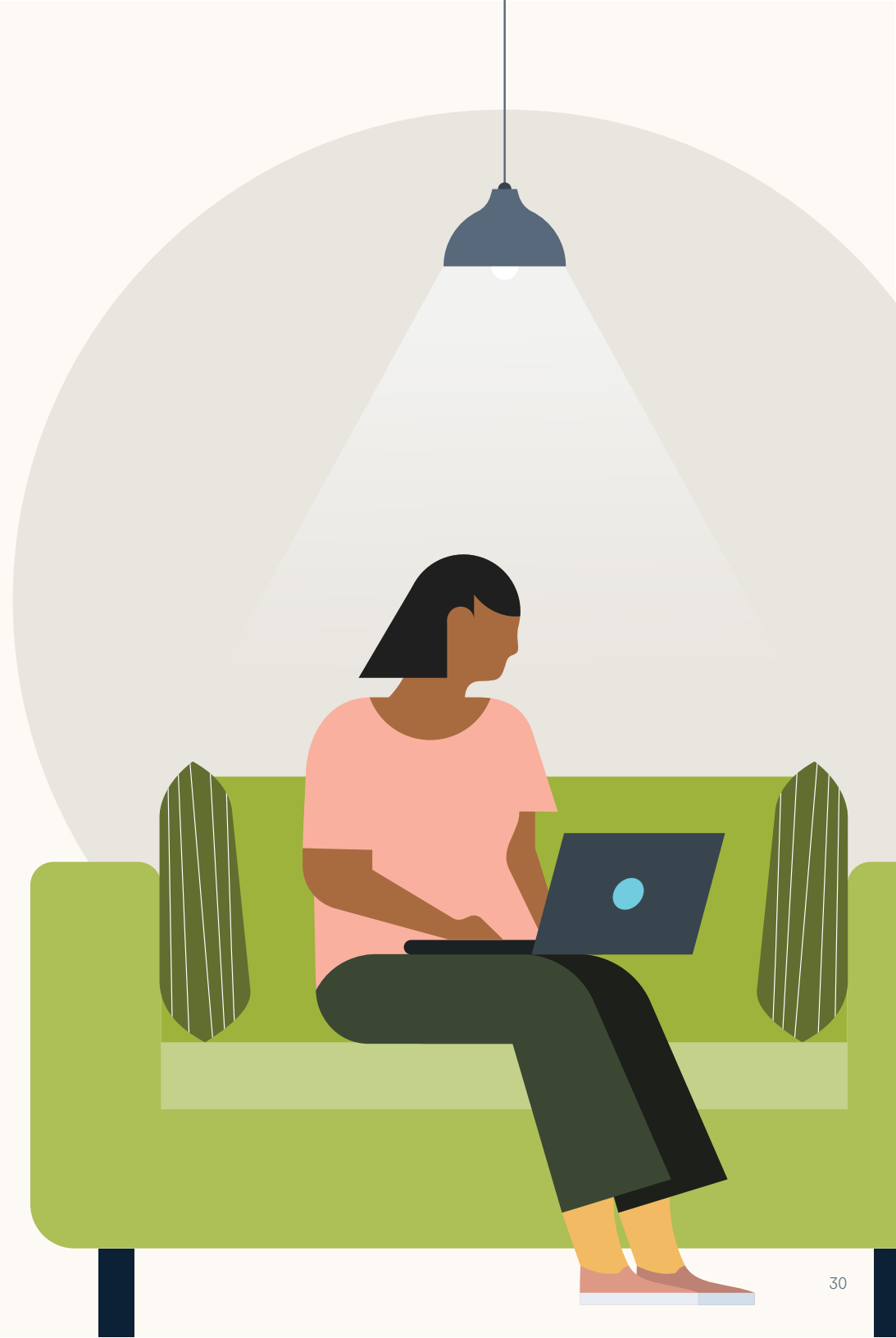
What do buyers see as the most important factor influencing their purchase decision?



Trend #4

The importance of brand increases the value of sales establishing a closer working relationship with marketing. It's therefore worrying news that, in many cases, the circumstances of the pandemic seem to have undermined the sales-marketing partnership. Although 28% of salespeople say they've been working more closely with marketing over the past year, slightly more admit to working less with their marketing colleagues. Perhaps as a result, only 27% rate the quality of their marketing-sourced leads as excellent.

It's telling that top sales performers who exceed their quota by 25% or more are more likely to have invested time in working with marketing, with a third of respondents saying they have a closer working relationship than before.



Trend #5

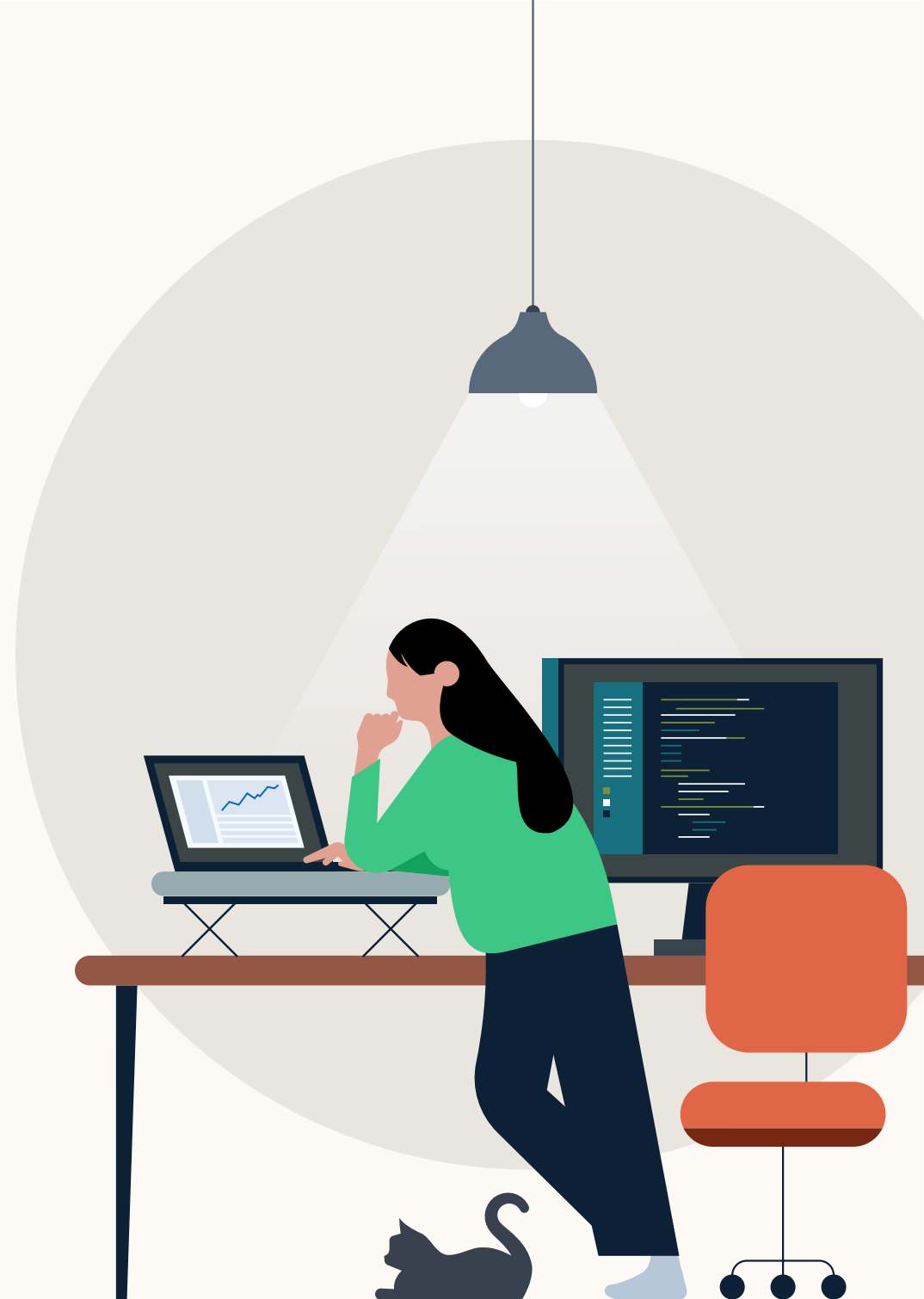
Data is taking on a broader role within sales



of sales professionals in
the Netherlands say their
organisations will invest more in
sales intelligence tools this year

Trend #5

The rise of virtual selling and growing investment in sales intelligence platforms mean that sales organisations have more data at their disposal than ever before. The changes to the buyer journey and the shifting nature of demand mean that they have more need of it to try and interpret the emerging sales landscape. This has pushed the Sales Operations role to the fore – and it's changing the way that organisations apply data to understand how their sales teams perform. The growing ranks of sales operations experts will be asked to help businesses cope with change by increasing the quality of and confidence in sales data, and applying it to a wider range of tasks.



Applying data to understanding a changing buyer journey

Data is taking on a wide-ranging role in sales planning, sales professionals saying their organisation uses it for a variety of reasons. Including evaluating patterns from lost business, seeking insights from deals won, selecting industries to target, defining the buying committee, and to assess salespeople's performance.

Assessing performance is more likely to involve data on customer satisfaction (used by 35% of sales organisations) than it is individual quota (23%). This reflects the focus that sales organisations in the Netherlands have on long-term customer relationships. The greater emphasis on activity quantity (27%) and team quota met (29%) reflects the need for more nuanced analysis of how sales professionals work at a time when deals are often moving more slowly.

Ways organisations in the Netherlands are using data



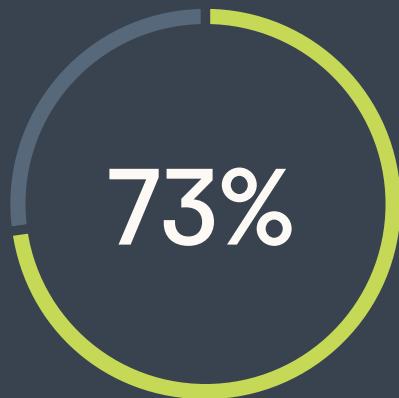
Trend #5

Sales organisations in the Netherlands today however also face a challenge in data confidence. Only 20% of salespeople in the Netherlands describe themselves as very confident in their CRM data. The barriers to confidence include CRM data that is inaccurate or out of date (43%), the lack of a unified cross-company view of data (37%) and sales data that is incomplete (36%).



Trend #6

Diversity provides a crucial competitive edge



All other things being equal,
71% of buyers in the
Netherlands say that they will
buy from a sales organisation
they see as more diverse

Trend #6

This report provides a detailed, data-rich snapshot of sales in the Netherlands following a year unlike any other. However, the state of sales can never be described by numbers alone. At a time when audiences feel bombarded by cold calls and exhausted by Zoom meetings, the ability to form a genuine human connection is more prized than ever. The techniques that we've described in this report, such as making greater use of sales intelligence and committing to a buyer-first philosophy, are effective because they help to create a trusted space for these connections to form. They're supported by challenging thinking, fresh and original add comma after perspectives and a capacity for empathy and understanding. And the importance of these factors is causing diversity to emerge as a key area of competitive advantage in sales.

Today's buyers want to deal with organisations that reflect their communities. The perceived diversity of a brand or organisation is increasingly important for its right to bid – and to be considered as a supplier. As the face of an organisation, the sales team sends one of the clearest signals about its commitment to diversity.

All other things being equal, 71% of buyers in the Netherlands say that they will buy from a more diverse sales organisation over one with less diversity, and 73% agree that their likelihood to buy from a given organisation increases when the sales team represents its community and the industry it serves. Buyers don't just seek out

diversity for its own sake – they actively seek the diverse thinking that comes with it. As this report has shown, buyers don't want to deal with salespeople who all look and sound the same – or who just play back what they think the buyer wants to hear.

Sales professionals are starting to recognise the importance of diversity, with 38% agreeing that a diverse sales team improves internal culture and 35% saying that it drives better ideas, more innovation and less conventional thinking. However, there is still a long way to go. Only 21% believe that their organisation has exceeded its goals on diversity. Fewer than half say that their organisation currently pursues initiatives such as creating a more inclusive culture, training managers on diversity or developing onboarding processes that can build a sense of belonging.

Many aspects of sales have been transformed over the last year. However, the task of building more diverse, inclusive sales organisations could offer the most important support of all to sustainable future growth.

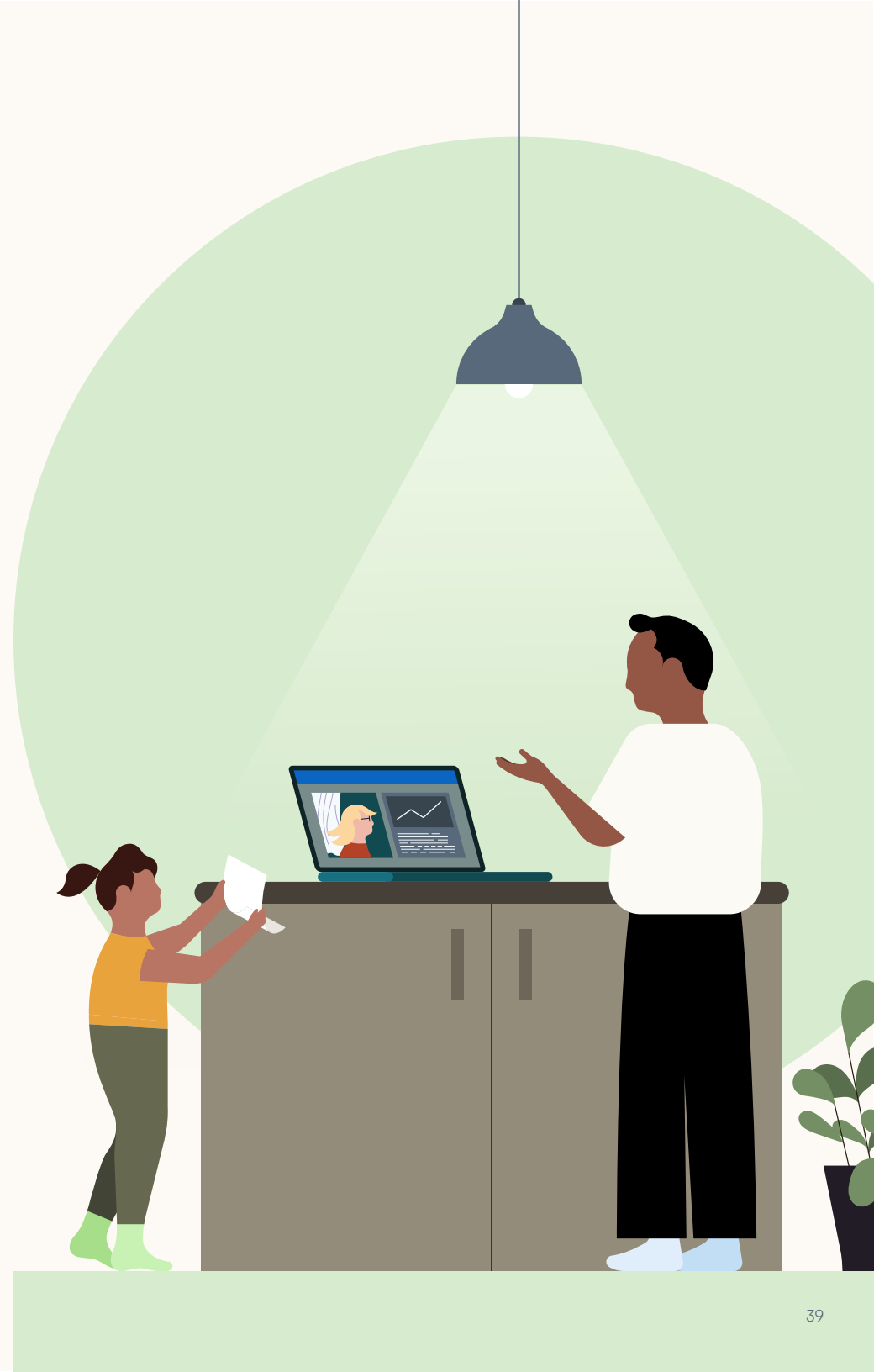


The future of sales is here

This State of Sales report confirms that the future of selling in the Netherlands has arrived ahead of schedule. Sales technologies, techniques and tactics that once sounded futuristic are now the mainstream. It's not just that they've been adopted by sales teams. Crucially, they are now the experience of sales that buyers demand.

Research from McKinsey in October 2020 found that only between 20% and 30% of B2B buyers in Europe ever want to interact with sales professionals in-person again, even in an ideal post-pandemic world. Our research backs this up, not just by showing what buyers want to avoid – but by highlighting the aspects of the new sales that they are embracing.

Virtual selling is here to stay. This has propelled investment in sales technology forward, which has in turn changed the game when it comes to sales professionals' ability to understand their prospects and identify opportunities to add value. Rather than depersonalising sales, the prevalence of technology is raising the bar for the quality of sales conversations. Buyers want to be challenged through original, insightful perspectives that offer a form of value they can't find through their own remote research. This is elevating the role of the sales professional from a channel of information to a channel for inspiration and ideas.



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LinkedIn Sales Solutions