



# Closing the gap:

The strategic importance of sales insights

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# A new insights-driven era of sales

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**With the numerous and varied influences on today's purchase decisions, having an insights-driven sales organization can be advantageous. However, it requires sales leaders to take a proactive stance and harness the data around them.**

The world of sales is moving more quickly than ever before. New working habits, new buyer behaviors and unforeseen economic challenges have all led to a complex buying (and selling) environment. Understanding and keeping pulse of the shifting market is key to sales leaders remaining competitive.

This requires closing the widening gap between data collection, insights and action. As trends change and patterns emerge, data-backed insights will be key to improving decision making in the unpredictable period ahead.

It is here that sales insights can play a pivotal role.

This guide explores what it means for sales leaders to put meaningful insights at the center of sales – looking at how sales leaders can improve their organization through better insights, and better use of insights, both now and in the future.

**Closing the gap: The strategic importance of sales insights** is a part of our **Real Sales** series, where we take an honest look at today's sales industry from the perspectives of real-life sales leaders. For this guide, our analysis is based on recent comprehensive interviews and research at LinkedIn examining numerous sales analysts and experts from around the world.



# Why sales insights matter

It's no longer enough to rely solely on instinct and intuition for sales success. To make truly informed decisions, data-backed, actionable insights are necessary. They are what helps to paint a clearer picture of the world prospects live in, and helps sales leaders make clearer decisions about how and when to sell.

Insights allow sales leaders to guide their teams towards more personalized and targeted outreach. One that reaches the right lead, at the right time, with a message that resonates. Today's buyers answer just one in 18 sales calls and open one in four emails<sup>1</sup>, meaning a tailored approach is necessary to avoid getting lost in the increasing noise.

What's more, insights can help sales professionals be regarded as genuine partners to buyers. By using informed, tailored outreach from the get-go, sales teams are in the best position to build a trusting relationship with buyers – one that brings long-term value in addition to the initial sale.

**4 in 5 salespeople still identify a gap between the data used by sales and marketing<sup>2</sup>**

## Insights beyond sales

Sales insights aren't just good for sales leaders looking for clarity. They can also help a business shape its growth by sparking innovation and steering the roadmap to success.

For instance, sales insights can help establish a single view of the customer, allowing the business to better manage each opportunity that comes through. This is especially relevant for companies who have adopted account-based marketing strategies. Now, marketing teams can use sales insights to better qualify and target leads, build insight profiles on customer types, and develop collateral that has greater impact.

And, by having first-hand insight from buyers, businesses can have a better idea of what's unprofitable and what's worth investing in. For instance, sales conversations can be full of insights about how a product can be improved, how a pricing structure could be reorganized, or how the user experience could be enhanced.

Insight is a strategic asset that can help businesses thrive through better decision making. But all this depends on having the right data. Currently, four in five salespeople still identify a significant gap between the data used by marketing and sales teams<sup>3</sup>. And as data sets grow and become more diverse, data can be a challenge to manage and quantify. Not to mention that sales data itself requires the right skill and expertise to derive actionable insights.



1. According to Alyssa Merwin, VP of Sales Solutions at LinkedIn and <https://blog.topohq.com/sales-development-technology-the-stack-emerges/>  
2. According to Alyssa Merwin, VP of Sales Solutions at LinkedIn and <https://blog.topohq.com/sales-development-technology-the-stack-emerges/>  
3. LinkedIn's State of Sales Report 2018 - <https://www.linkedin.com/business/sales/blog/b2b-sales/announcing-linkedin-3rd-annual-state-of-sales-report-2018/>

# How insights can help build better strategy

The term ‘insights’ is often used liberally across the realm of business. However, sales insights aren’t the result of ad-hoc findings, but rather the result of quality data being put through a rigorous and diligent process. By having insights that come from monitoring, tracking and analyzing sales and its associated patterns, sales leaders get a true competitive advantage.

This applies to both internal and external sales insights. Internal insights, typically based around variables controllable within a business, can allow sales leaders to make faster more scalable decisions for the entire sales organization.

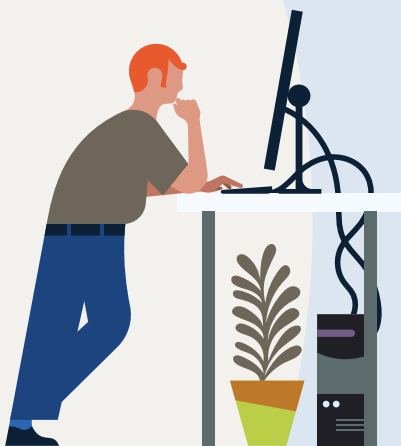
While external insights can shed light on customers and their behaviors. These insights help sales leaders engage with customers in more value-driven ways. Knowing which insights are needed, and where this data comes from, is the first step in developing a better sales strategy.

## Putting insight into action

Whether it’s territory planning, target setting, or pipeline management, there’s scope for insights to guide and shape what’s expected to come. Insights can also steer conversations later down the line. For instance, insights can help create a buyer-first culture, where sales leaders can continue to drive value even after the deal is closed. And with post-order insights, sales leaders continuously learn from and optimize their processes.

Insights can come out of any sales activity. The first steps are to assess the data and the granularity levels needed to discover the required insights. On top of that, the volume of data must be significant enough to allow for proper data analysis.

Insights can be mapped according to the different strategies required in an organization. Cross-functional teams should be assembled to react to what the insights signal, for instance, win back, acquisition, renewal, upsell, or cross sell.



### Top insights sales leaders should consider<sup>4</sup>

- **Firmographic data:**  
Understand areas of opportunities and growth
- **Pipeline insights:**  
Explore types of engagement required to generate a qualified pipeline
- **Adjustments to the opportunity forecasting process:**  
Understand which and how opportunities have changed
- **Engagement data:**  
Look at qualitative, behavioral driven insights that teams can use to adjust their own methods


4. According to Dan Gottlieb, Senior Analyst – Sales Practice at TOPO Research and Advisory

# How insights can help build better strategy

## Trust in data

Finding the right sales insights is one thing. Fostering an insights-driven culture to make use of the information is quite another. This comes down to trust. Sales leaders need to trust the source of the data, the data itself, the skills of the expert turning data into insight, and if that insight is presented in a clear and unbiased way.

At the moment, 4 in 10 sales leaders don't fully trust the data available to them in their organization's sales technology stack. Creating a more transparent and expert culture, and developing the right data governance procedures can help sales leaders resolve and overcome issues around the quality of the data.



**Primary data challenges, according to analysts<sup>5</sup>**

- **Lack of trust**  
Mistrust in data leads to a lack of confidence in data-driven decision making
- **Poor data quality**  
Inaccurate, inconsistent, and quickly outdated data gives a fragmented view
- **Data overload**  
Too much unstructured data becomes difficult to process
- **Privacy concerns**  
Challenging to keep up with data legislation and public sentiment

Finding the right combination of tools to turn data into actionable insights is complex. Each business will have its own set of priorities and needs surrounding data. This means finding the right combination of tools to turn data into actionable insights can be complex. Sales leaders need to establish their goals and work from there.

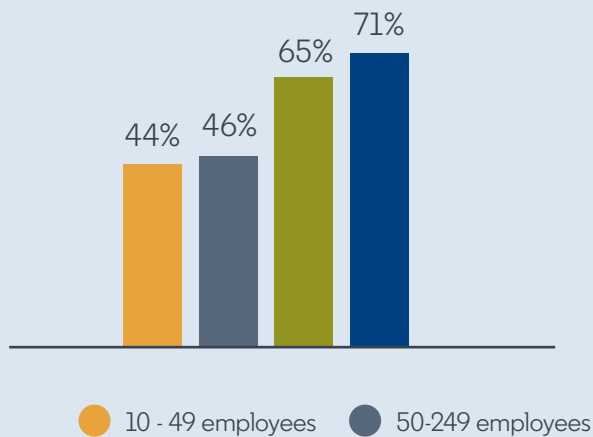
For instance, this could be getting greater clarity into their team's activities or needing better insight to improve sales planning. On average, companies use a combination of four different sales technologies overall, with tools focused on analysis and insight as most valued and most common.

**At the moment, four in 10 sales leaders don't fully trust the data available to them in their organization's sales technology stack.**

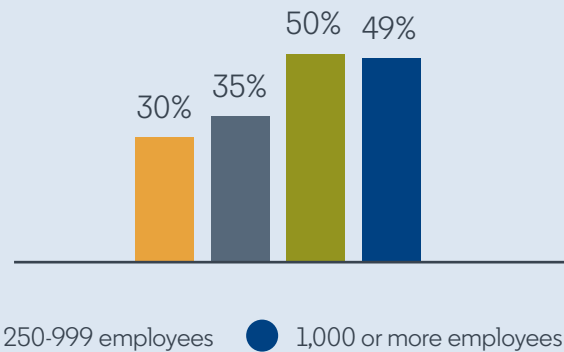
5. According to Eric Wittlake, Sr. Marketing Analyst at TOPO Research and Advisory

# How insights can help build better strategy

**Organizations with sales intelligence tools (e.g. reporting and analytics) in their sales technology stack**



**Organizations that rate sales intelligence tools (e.g. reporting and analytics) as the most important tool in their sales technology stack to achieving goals and targets<sup>6</sup>**



## People behind the numbers

Sales insights tend to be generated by sales operations (sales ops). However, while their ultimate goal is to steer the sales strategy, all too often, they spend too much time reacting and stitching together poor-quality data. This includes data that is out of date, incomplete, or fragmented.<sup>7</sup>

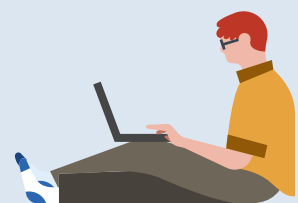
Sales leaders should aim to make their sales ops team a central, strategic arm within the organization. Sales ops need this support to fully use their analytical abilities to find faster routes to revenue for the sales team. Because after all, the most important part of insights isn't defining them, but applying and acting on them to drive business results.

## Right team, right skills

Data analysis, as a skill, is something sales leaders should pay close attention to. LinkedIn research reveals that there was a trifold increase in 'data analysis' appearing in sales professionals' profiles from 2015 to 2019.<sup>8</sup>

What's more, top performing sales reps (those who achieve 125% of their quota or above) are more likely than their counterparts to consult and use data. For instance, they're finding patterns from lost business and using that to improve their future win rates.

**Sales reps who reach 125% of their quota or above are more likely than their counterparts to consult data<sup>9</sup>**



6. LinkedIn research - Sales Technology: Unlocking the potential of your team through times of change

7. LSI research: LinkedIn Sops Persona Research, Jan 2020

8. The LinkedIn State of Sales Report 2020 - <https://business.linkedin.com/sales-solutions/b2b-sales-strategy-guides/the-state-of-sales-2020-report>

9. The LinkedIn State of Sales Report 2020 - <https://business.linkedin.com/sales-solutions/b2b-sales-strategy-guides/the-state-of-sales-2020-report>



# How insights can help build better strategy

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Having a better understanding of insight and data needs to go beyond the sales organization. Data literacy and insight skills are needed across all levels and all departments. This becomes even more relevant if sales insights are integrated and relied upon across the organization, as a whole.

Sales leaders looking to cement the role of insights within their organization should use an educational and inspirational approach with their teams: case studies and workshops can help to demonstrate and explore the value of insights, while certification in data literacy can support employees' professional development.





# Using insights during times of uncertainty

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## Insights to pivot

With promising top-of-funnel conversations negatively impacted by the pandemic, revenue lines have been put at risk. To counter that, many sales teams have had to pivot from customer acquisition to customer retention in a very short timeframe.

This has also led to a boom in inside selling, where referrals and relationships now play a crucial role. Insights can help sales leaders prioritize which customers are still growing or stable (whether that's through data around hiring notices or other trends) and shift their territory planning to ensure sales teams are fairly maximizing their potential and reach.

## Insights for efficiency

Increasing and protecting revenue is vital to remaining buoyant in today's landscape. This requires figuring out how to keep – or increase – productivity with an even leaner sales team. With shifts in spend and changes in purchase behavior expected to continue in the long-term, sales leaders should consider how they plan to continue to deliver value. In short, cost-cutting alone will not protect an organization through such unstable times. The right insights are needed to find the best path forward.

## Insights to inform the next steps

Data and insights can help identify the course of action with the greatest potential to deliver value. Intent data can gauge demand levels and allow sales professionals to focus on the right prospects and existing customer relationships. Analyzing the main customer challenges can help teams segment tasks and identify further actions to take.



### Key questions for sales leaders in times of uncertainty, according to analysts

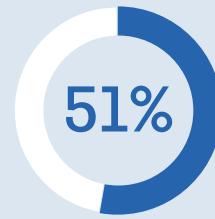
- How can I reach my goals using less resources?
- Are there more innovative ways to meet buyers' needs?
- Can I find new areas to explore that will give me a sales boost?
- Can data, tools and teams work more effectively?

# Using insights during times of uncertainty

## Insights and human motivation

By using up-to-date data, sales leaders keep track of buyer perceptions and spending changes – as and when they happen. But beyond sales insights, sales leaders need to remember that human insights matter as well. Data alone can't tap into this. Human insights are about considering your team's wants, needs, aspirations and fears – something that can't be measured with numbers.

To have an effective team, sales leaders must ensure performance management systems and incentives reflect the new reality people are operating in. Insights into sales teams' motivation and morale are critical in developing ongoing strategies and planning.



**of organizations have implemented new technology and systems to help overcome challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis<sup>10</sup>**



10. LinkedIn research - Sales Technology: Unlocking the potential of your team through times of change

# Insights into the future

Guided selling – the act of delivering enablement to a sales team – is gaining momentum. And it is likely to develop even more quickly in today's somewhat unpredictable environment. Real time insights can help sales leaders better navigate remote selling and the objections, pricing issues, or coaching gaps that come with virtual selling.

It's also expected that intent data will become more influential. As organizations work with smaller sales forces and reduced receptivity to new outbound customers, focusing efforts on the right prospects and existing customers is essential to success. Sales ops will have to find the right tools to help them predict churn and identify greater upsell opportunities as economies recover.

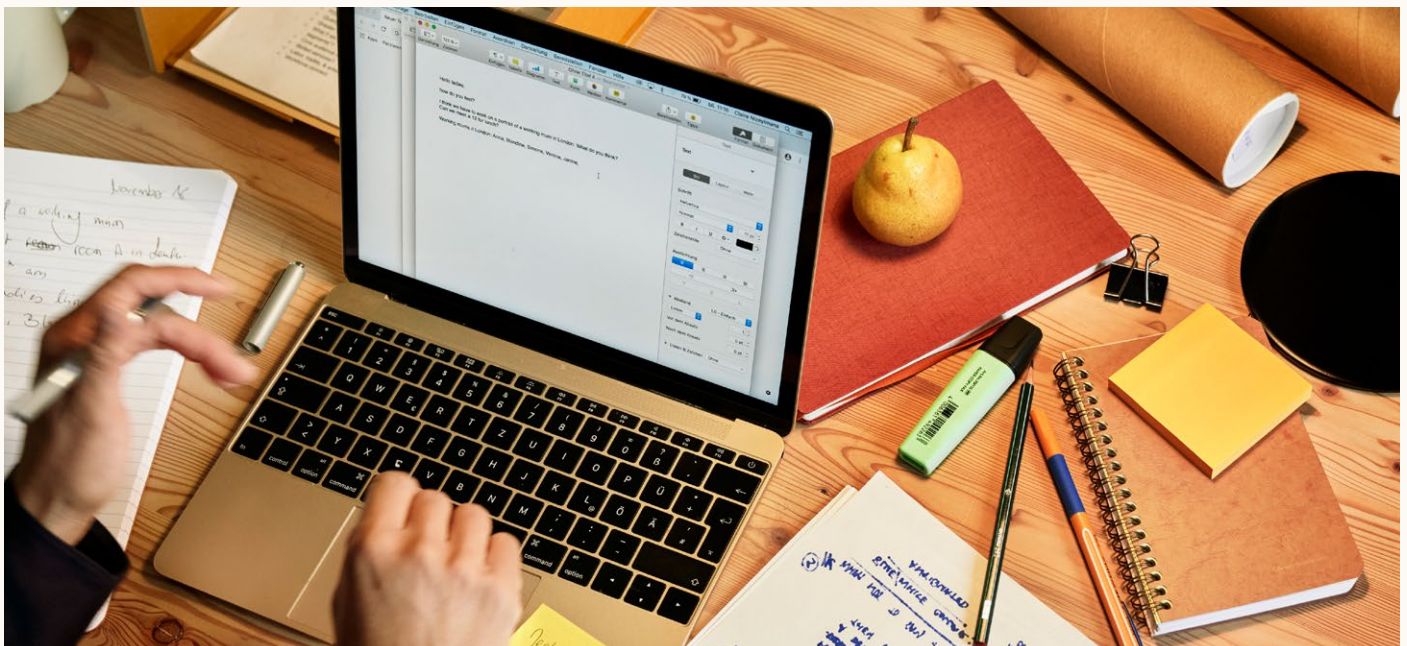
But, the future isn't just all data and tools. There's increasing demand for thought leadership and education as internal organizational silos break down. The current climate will likely fuel increased collaboration, and insights will have to reflect that. For instance, it'll become more commonplace to see sales ops teams working with marketing to invest in activities, such as webinars and customer testimonials.

*“Sales enablement tools will allow for better collaboration, alignment, and customer messaging between sales and marketing teams to drive sales without upping headcount.*

*Predictive analytics will give insight into sales data to allow for better predictions and resource planning, including if and when it's necessary to hire new sales reps.*

*Artificial Intelligence tools will automate tasks to free up human resources and allow sales reps to spend more time selling.”*

**Sales decision maker,  
based in the USA<sup>11</sup>**



11. LinkedIn research - Sales Technology: Unlocking the potential of your team through times of change



# From sales insights to outcomes

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Insights help to educate or inspire action. They exist to make a sales leader's decision-making process as clear-cut as possible. They allow sales professionals to prioritize their time: how it's spent and who it's spent with.

This is all thanks to data and technology playing a more integral part in sales. And in an increasingly virtual selling world, the stakes are even higher. "This shift is good news for data-driven organizations, but can be a challenge for those who are not yet harnessing their data to deploy sales teams against the right opportunities," says Alyssa Merwin, LinkedIn's vice president of Sales Solutions.

"It is time for leaders to guide their organization down an insight-driven path that starts with sales and extends throughout the business."

Building a robust and strategic operational approach to insights should be the focus for all sales leaders looking to futureproof their business. In the period ahead, sales will need to concentrate on solving their customers' biggest problems and doing so in a way that provides long-term value. How organizations go about this will become an important differentiator. Organizations who are efficient, effective and informed by insights will stay on top. This is true for times of uncertainty, as well as for times of success.



**Alyssa Merwin,**  
Vice President,  
LinkedIn Sales Solutions

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## About Real Sales:

**Real Sales** is a content series that takes an honest look at today's sales industry from the perspectives of real-life sales leaders. It explores the themes of technology, leadership and talent, looking at how each can enable sales professionals to better nurture their relationships with prospects, customers and with their wider team.



## About LinkedIn:



LinkedIn Sales Solutions makes it simple to establish and grow relationships with prospects and customers by helping you tap into the power of LinkedIn, the world's largest professional network of more than 706 million members.

Designed for sales professionals, LinkedIn Sales Navigator combines LinkedIn's network data, relevant news sources, and your accounts, leads, and preferences to produce customized recommendations and insights. With LinkedIn Sales Navigator, you can focus on the right people and companies, stay up to date on what's happening with your accounts, and build trust with your prospects and customers.